
THE GAY BANDIT
OF THE BORDER

IN a patch of moonlight the masked rider halted. Just ahead, just beyond the fringe of shadowy mesquite that skirted the desert's edge, two dusty wagon tracks led out over the mesa. They were all that marked the Yuma-Verdi road, those tracks, and for fifty miles of cactus and sand they were all that recorded the turbulent existence of an international boundary line. But now, like faded, discarded ribbons, they stretched, lonely and indistinct, across the desert, then dropped abruptly over the edge of the mesa.

Minutes passed. The tall rider sat motionless—a brooding statue, silvered with moonlight. Only the eyes moved—eyes that glittered restlessly through the mask, tirelessly searching that velvet darkness ahead. A fitful night wind crept like a sigh among the mesquite. Once the horse pawed impatiently at the sand, and once he raised his head to catch some faint, elusive message.

Silence. An endless silence while the twisted shadows of the mesquite lengthened before the sinking moon. Toward the far-off Mexican foothills a coyote howled. Again silvery, moon-drenched silence, while the long minutes passed.

Abruptly, in the same startled second, both horse and horseman raised their heads. Out of the desert night rose a sound, far off and indistinct. From a formless, pulsating murmur it rolled nearer, until at last the sound resolved itself into the muffled tread of galloping horses.

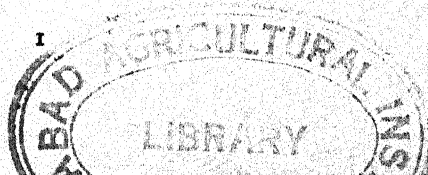
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Only then the quiet figure in the moonlight moved. A touch of the rein, and the horse stepped forward into the sheltering mesquite, where again they froze to immobile statues, lost in that shadowy obscurity. Gently the man's hand dropped for an instant to the black automatic at his side. The barrel was still warm. His knees clasped the horse more tightly. His lithe figure had taken on a new tenseness, and he leaned forward with coldly eager eyes.

In the moonlight ahead the night had become dimly peopled with galloping horsemen, swinging down toward the mesa's edge. Mexican cavalry on patrol. They rode in loose ranks, two abreast, talking in low tones. Little whirling pools of sand rose beneath their pounding feet, then died, and in another minute the sound of their hurried passing faded. As the last sombreroed figure melted back into that night of silence, the solitary horseman left the shadows and rode slowly to the mesa's rim. Leaning far out in the saddle, his eyes followed their steep descent to where, almost directly beneath him, the trail turned and plunged steeply downward. There the little cavalcade had halted.

In a tight circle they were clustered about a huddled figure that lay face downward in the road. Out of the stillness the angry hum of many voices rose to the solitary rider's ears, and beneath the mask his teeth gleamed in a brief smile. He bent forward, watching. Two men had slipped from their horses and raised the limp form in the roadway. For a moment their leader looked at the face, then formed the word "Lopez!" A shiver ran through the group. The night seemed to

grow suddenly chill. Uneasily each man peered into the darkness as if it now loomed suddenly menacing.

Then from above burst a laugh, wild and jeering, and for a brief instant the horsemen below saw outlined against the desert sky the tall form of a masked rider. Leisurely his gloved hand rose in a derisive gesture, and again that jeering, mocking laugh floated down.

A rattle of stones as the horse swerved back, and now the dusty edge of the mesa gleamed white and empty beneath the moon.

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then, lighting a cigarette, walked toward the door.

The first thing one might have noticed about the man was his great size. Tall, large-limbed, with huge shoulders and a chest that curved powerfully beneath the tan tweed suit. His walk, too, gave a sense of vast reserve power, the panther walk of a born wrestler. And next, as if in softening contrast, one noticed the friendly eyes of the man, the full but firm lips, curving upward a little at the ends, just enough to relieve some of the grimness in the square, clear-cut jaw. He was a man one might turn after in passing; a man one would remember without quite knowing why. About him one felt a sense of poise—a seasoned quality. As if life and perhaps sorrow had given him a maturity beyond his years. Yet he could not have been over twenty-five.

Pulling open the door the man looked down the track to where the red lantern of a flagman gleamed, then vaulted over the rear railing of the Pullman. For a moment he stood looking about him while the hot, unforgettable breath of the desert beat in upon him, bringing a message faintly, provokingly familiar. He felt the soft, dry sand beneath his feet. Behind him

and ahead the
On either side faint,
ghostly and cactus stretched end-
lessly into the distance. Again a little vagrant wind stirred
the sands. Eagerly he raised both powerful arms
above his head.

"Gad," he rejoiced, "the old desert again." And
once more like some wild thing he snuffed the air.

A sound above him revealed the Pullman conductor
smiling down from the platform.

"Desert smell good tonight?"

"Does to me." The big man laughed. "It's a smell
I'd almost forgotten. Do we stay here long?"

"The train from the north is late and we got to wait.
Maybe most of the night."

"That puts us hours late into Verdi."

The conductor nodded. "We're due at Verdi junc-
tion in forty minutes—just midnight. We'll be lucky
to get there by daybreak."

For a moment a shadow of disappointment crossed
the man's face, then he laughed. "Well, I've been fif-
teen years making it. A few hours' delay won't be fatal.
Verdi junction is four miles from town, isn't it?"

"A good four miles. The junction's just a tin shed
and two pairs of tracks. Rest belongs to the coyotes."
The conductor looked disparagingly out into the dis-
tance. "It's an empty country. Mexican border's only
half a mile south of here. In daylight you can see the
boundary posts and sometimes a patrol of Mexican
cavalry."

"What are they for—ornament?"

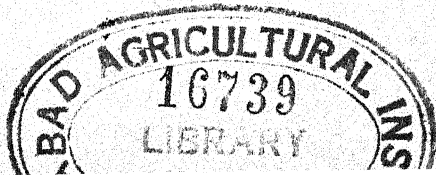
"Oh, this part of the world's always been on a hair trigger. There's still occasional rustling and knife-carving. Right now the Verdi country has one bandit nobody's been able to get. Seems like there always will be hell popping wherever there's a boundary line between two nations." He yawned. "I'd get a night's sleep if I were you. The porter can call you just before we hit the junction."

But to the man it seemed only a few minutes after he had closed his eyes that the porter was plucking at the sheets. Through the half-open window, a faint, eerie light glowed over the desert's edge, and the chill of early dawn lay in the air. He dressed quickly and as the train stopped ran down the steps.

The conductor had been right. Verdi junction was nothing much. A hitching post, a weaving, rutted road, and, beyond, the brown sands of the desert dotted by the dull green of mesquite and cactus.

Already the passenger's trunk had been swung to the ground. In another moment the Pullman lurched forward and the long line of cars pulled away into the red of the sunrise.

Alone in the austere immensity of the desert, the man looked about him. No one in sight. No one to meet him. Near the tracks a wooden sign confided that Verdi lay four miles to the south, but his eyes, following its direction, settled curiously on a black object at the top of a little rise. In the growing light it resolved itself into a long open car there in the middle of the road. Outlined against the sky the machine loomed up like some derelict specter abandoned in the midst of the



desert. No one at the wheel. The thing was simply there, empty and motionless and inexplicable.

Puzzled, the man walked down the road, noting with increasing wonder that no footprints led away from the car. He stopped before it, laid a casual hand on the hood, then drew back with a quick start of surprise. The radiator was hot! Once more he cast a rapid look about him, but the desert lay silent and empty beneath the slanting rays of the early sun.

Suddenly, apparently from beneath his feet a woman's voice was raised in mild resentment. "Where did I put that damned bolt this time?" the voice asked.

Then from beneath the car an arm appeared, followed, after a moment's silence, by a head of coppery hair. A scrambling, rustling in the sand, and now the man found himself looking down into a surprised face, generously smudged with oil and grease. A pair of wide violet eyes looked up at him, then the rest of the girl rolled from beneath the car and slowly arranged a badly wrinkled dress. She sat up. She considered him for a moment, then suddenly she smiled.

"You are Señor Radcliffe."

It was a contagious smile, and the voice itself held just the trace of an accent.

He looked down at the smudged face. His eyes twinkled. "We have with us the village mind-reader."

Rapidly she ran both hands through the thick waves of her hair, shaking out the sands that still clung. "That," she said, "was easy. I promised Don Bob to drive over and pick up his friend Ted Radcliffe. You're the only applicant. And I would have been here

stopped. "I haven't many happy memories of Denver." Then his eyes grew somber, he fell silent and, busy with their own thoughts, they drove steadily across the glistening sands.

A gate loomed up ahead of them, and passing through it, the girl stopped the car before a low adobe bungalow. About it stretched thick lawns, their cool greenness beckoning in welcome contrast to the drab browns of the desert. Vines covered the adobe walls. Two servants ran out and in answer to the girl's brief orders carried Radcliffe's bags and trunk into the house. Reluctantly he stepped from the car.

"I hate to let you go," he told her, "but you've been a dear to bring me over."

She held out a slim hand. "Nothing. Bob's friends are mine. Adios."

The cool little hand seemed to lie so trustingly in his, and again he felt his pulse quicken. "Not adios. For I will see you again, won't I?"

The wide eyes looked steadily down at him, the lips moved in a tiny smile. "Do you really want to, Ted Radcliffe?"

"I want to very much. And I also want to know your name."

She laughed. "I wonder. But you will know it, big man. And you'll also see me—soon."

Then with a little nod and a friendly wave, she left him standing before the steps of the bungalow. He watched her throw the long car into gear and start away. He was still watching when she passed the gate and vanished down the dusty road.

CHAPTER II

HIS first day had begun quietly enough. But before that first day ended it was destined to throw Ted Radcliffe headlong into conflict with the greatest powers of all the border country. Yet the morning held no cloud. He spent it rambling about the ranchhouse, unpacking and writing, conscious only of a serene sense of well-being. After long days of train travel the desert air was like wine, and that world of throbbing sunlight and of far horizons, the rising, shimmering heat waves and the purple hills of Mexico—all these were to him the fulfilment of some promise long deferred.

Lunch over, he went out to the corral where, in the shadow of the saddle house, a grizzled Mexican sat braiding a leather quirt. He touched his sombrero as Radcliffe approached.

"I am Manuel," the Mexican announced in slow Spanish. "Can I serve the señor?"

"Just now, Manuel, the best of service would be a horse to ride. Will you saddle one?"

But Manuel within the next few minutes saddled two horses, and, handing the reins of the larger animal to Radcliffe, said casually, "Don Bob would not have the señor ride alone on this, his first day."

Smiling, the big man nodded and they turned south toward the Mexican boundary, Radcliffe ahead, the old Mexican shuffling along at a tireless trot, while silently he told himself that the big Eastern gringo could at least ride.

Presently they dropped down from the mesa into a little river valley which, Manuel told him, marked the Mexican line. Here they watered their horses, then crossed and bore still farther south into Mexico. To the left a ranchhouse appeared, from whose chimney a blue pencil of smoke pointed straight upward, bringing to the horsemen that sweet, acrid smell of burning mesquite. On either side little checkerboard fields of green told of spring's coming, and of farm crops just breaking through the soil. They told, too, of toil and care in the face of adversity, and of unending battle waged against the desert's stern hostility. It was an outpost, that ranch, an outpost of man, the home-maker, invading the desert. Beyond the water-tank's motionless windmill a few cattle rested after the day's grazing.

All the world was hushed. The benediction of a desert afternoon brooded over the land—the friendliness of tilled fields and human habitation. To Radcliffe, the utter peace of it held him.

He was about to speak when a shrill scream pierced the stillness and straightened both men bolt upright in their saddles. Again that agonized scream, and from behind the ranchhouse a barefoot peon boy fled toward them in shrill terror down the slope. Behind him two Mexican vaqueros ran clumsily in high-heeled boots, lashing the boy with their quirts, cutting through the thin shirt until again he screamed in an ecstasy of pain. With each stinging blow the boy leaped frantically into the air, and at each jump his pursuers laughed and struck again. Once he fell, but staggered to his feet beneath a hail of blows.



As Radcliffe spurred forward, the boy caught sight of him, and with redoubled speed made for the rider. Seizing his stirrup, he turned upward a suppliant face, revealing across his dark cheek the deep welt of a quirt.

"Help me, señor," he cried in Spanish, and even as he spoke the leading vaquero seized him and raised his quirt to strike again.

Radcliffe's leg flashed over the saddle horn. He seemed to strike the ground and the vaquero at the same instant, and in the next second the nearer Mexican rose in the air, turned twice, then sprawled face down upon the sand. In consternation his companion halted, and after a moment of stupefied silence called to Manuel in Spanish, "Who is this gringo fool that he interferes with the riders of Paco Morales?"

Before Manuel could reply, Radcliffe himself answered. "Come just a little nearer, *amigo*, and I will interfere yet again." The giant muscles of his shoulder twitched as if eager to strike. The vaquero thoughtfully stepped back a pace.

Gently Radcliffe spoke to the boy. "Why do they beat you?"

"Because I watered my father's cattle at the stream, señor. They say the stream is low and that the water belongs to Paco Morales."

"Is this so?" He looked up at Manuel.

The old Mexican shrugged. "The stream belongs to all. But the herdsmen of Morales do not suffer others to use it."

"How can they prevent it?"

Moodily Manuel nodded toward the vaqueros. "Paco

Morales has more than a hundred riders. They shoot well and are unafraid. That is why men who are wise do not dispute them."

The boy's frightened eyes looked up at his pursuers. "But the water from our well has dried. Is it the will of God my father's cattle should die?"

Twirling his quirt the vaquero laughed. "I am no priest. But certainly it is not the will of Paco Morales that you should use his water or his grass." Again he scowled at Radcliffe. "Jito, our leader, will soon make this gringo regret he ever raised a hand against one of our riders."

Grimly Radcliffe smiled back. "If you would only come a little closer, I might make it two of your riders." He raised the man to his feet and thrust him toward his comrade. "Get out," he ordered briefly, "before I twist your neck."

Sullenly the Mexicans turned up the hill, and, reaching in his pocket, Radcliffe dropped a silver dollar into the peon's hand. But Manuel's face was troubled as they rode back toward the border.

"It is not often, señor, that one touches a herdsman of Jito's band," he said at last. Then, after a moment's silence he chuckled aloud. "*Qué va*, how that carrion flew through the air!" He looked admiringly at the great muscular body and the thick neck. "But the fellow was right. Jito will try to tear you apart for this."

"Do you think he could?"

Again Manuel took in the big, tightly knit form, the arched chest, and arms like flexible steel. "Now, by Our Lady, I do not know," he said doubtfully.

"There is none on the border one half so strong as Jito. Caramba! It would be a fight worth living for."

In silence they rode slowly up the long slope toward the mesa, and Radcliffe, remembering his dinner appointment at the military post, touched spurs to his horse, reaching the ranchhouse full five minutes ahead of the perspiring Manuel. He hurried into his evening clothes just as an army car drew up before the bungalow, and was driven through a crimson desert sunset to the little cavalry post that lay on the outskirts of Verdi. Thirty-five years ago it had been a refuge against hostile Navahos in the days when Verdi itself was a turbulent cow camp. But now for many a year the well-kept military reservation had dozed through a long, uneventful succession of commanding officers. Before the quarters of the latest of these the car stopped, and Radcliffe read the sign over the vine-covered porch, "*L. R. Blount, Major, U. S. A.*"

It was Mrs. Blount who received him—Aunt Clara, he remembered, the girl had called her.

From the first he liked this vigorous, middle-aged woman. Liked the firm handshake, the keen, straight look and the deep restful voice.

"I sent for you before the others." She led him to the broad fireplace. "That was partly selfishness to have to myself the new mysterious arrival. And then I can describe the menagerie before it arrives. For, like a perfect hostess, I've invited everybody that matters—and several that don't."

"You're being awfully good to a stranger."

"Rot. You're not a stranger here. Already Verdi is

whispering that you've come out to buy miles and miles of land and irrigate the whole desert. Verdi well remembers that father of yours."

Radcliffe nodded somberly. "Yet this same Verdi sent him away a pauper. It took him years to win back prosperity again."

"But men say he did win it back—with interest." She lighted a cigarette. "Why did you come, really?"

"Would you believe me if I said I didn't know? That's the real truth. Five days ago I was back in New York without a thought of coming West. I had just returned from Europe and found a letter from my father's banker telling me to come out and see Bob Harkness. Father and Bob, you know, were partners in the old days."

His hostess considered the end of her cigarette. "So perhaps there is a mystery, then. We'll ask Bob tonight. Bob, of course, has told me all about you. But I didn't quite expect to see a young giant saunter in on me." She looked at him in frank approval. "You're quite too big and good-looking to have come out here. If the boys don't lynch you before the month's out, and if Adela spares you—"

"Adela," he repeated. "That should be the name of some goddess of the desert."

The woman nodded. "It almost describes her. The Mexican ranchers and peons would tell you she is a saint from Heaven. Some day she will be the richest girl in all north Mexico."

He laughed. "And beautiful, of course—she would have to be beautiful."

"Aren't all heiresses beautiful? No? Well, a dried-up old colonel once said that Adela had hair like a desert sunset."

A sudden recollection seized the man. "Has she—good Lord! Has she a pair of violet eyes?"

"If you wanted to be ever so ritzy you might call them violet. As a matter of sober truth, they're a very nice shade of blue."

"And she speaks with just the least—"

"Just the suspicion of an accent. That's Adela."

Once more in retrospect the man saw that upturned, smudgy face, then to the great delight of his hostess he told the tale, adding, "But the little impostor said she lived on a ranch with two or three cows."

"Two or three thousand wouldn't cover it." Her kindly eyes clouded. "Adela puzzles me," she added. "I think perhaps she puzzles herself. Behind her lies a queer childhood. As a child she had all the freedom of the desert ranges, but now she is held as strictly as in a cloister. She's both Mexican and American, yet never one or the other. Adela changes so swiftly. At times she's as you saw her this morning—at times the quiet, aloof little Mexican princess. Never really gay. Well—there are reasons for that, too. Meanwhile, look behind you."

It had grown dark outside and across the room, outlined against the lamplight, Radcliffe saw again his girl of the morning. That coppery wealth of hair curved now in a thick braid about her head, and the white ivory of her skin gleamed against a black low-cut evening dress. She was the same but somehow subtly different.

Their eyes met as he rose, and a little smile played about her lips. She took the older woman's extended hand.

"It's been so long," she said.

"Ages," agreed Aunt Clara. "And all your fault. If you would leave that feudal dungeon once in a while, you'd learn what's happening in the world of Verdi. Here, for example, is something very important. Here is Mr. Ted Radcliffe, who rides out of the East. He's been boring me with tales of some impossibly lovely lady who met him at the junction."

The girl smiled and seated herself beside Aunt Clara. Yes, she had changed—the same frank eyes, the same quiet, friendly smile, and yet he found himself regretting that their comradeship of the morning had disappeared.

"And I suppose," the girl was saying gravely over her cigarette, "that like all lovely ladies she left him and will never come back."

"Never," Radcliffe agreed. "I'm beginning to believe she never existed. She was just a mirage of the desert."

The girl turned to Aunt Clara. "Tell me more about your mysterious guest."

"Here's what Don Bob reports: It appears that this Mr. Radcliffe who stands smoking before us was first brought into prominence by his ability to carry an inflated pigskin through eleven opposing young gentlemen. For this naive gift he was twice made captain of Yale's football team. He also took great interest in contests whereby two opposing youths attempt to unravel each other's limbs and dislocate various joints for the

somewhat obscure purpose of forcing their opponent's shoulders on a dusty mat. Mr. Radcliffe was so successful in this pursuit that he was later amateur heavyweight wrestler of the East."

Ted Radcliffe nodded. "I also played on the freshman chess team."

Aunt Clara ignored the interruption. "Later this burly gentleman graduated with some such silly title as Bachelor of Arts and spent a year in Europe and another in Africa, hunting the kind of things one hunts there. In his spare moments he probably slew lions and zebras and posed with one foot poised on their Adam's apple."

The girl shook her head. "This amazing señor, then, is of the very rich?"

"He is, I am sorry to admit, one of the dirty rich. I gather that he has been reared in luxury."

"That," Radcliffe countered, "shows how even reasonably intelligent women can be misled."

Aunt Clara turned toward him. "Rumor says you have entirely too much money for your own good."

"Rumor is probably right. But I don't believe rumor ever said I was 'reared in luxury.' I wasn't. I've sold papers and shined shoes. One of my first memories is of my father holding me in his arms while we waited in a long bread line, because the holes in my shoes let snow in. That was what your border country did to father. No, I certainly wasn't reared in luxury."

He stopped, looked down at the two listening women, then went on. "How terribly strapped we were! I remember once in Denver a woman gave me a dollar for

clearing the snow from her pavement. I ran all the way home to show the big silver piece to dad. You know, there were tears in my father's eyes. He held it up in the sunlight and said to me so earnestly that I remember every word, 'Never be without these, son,' he told me. 'To be poor—that is the unforgivable sin.' "

Radcliffe's brooding face cleared. "We weren't poor long after that. My father's luck turned. That winter he herded sheep on shares, and next spring had a band of his own. Later we went to Washington and in a year father was the leading spirit in a group of men who were developing land in South and Central America. He touched every kind of industry—steamships, tobacco, sugar-cane plantations, tropical woods—and they all yielded gold. I'm very proud of him, and I respect him more than any man in the world. You see, we suffered together and came through the dark places together." Radcliffe stopped, and added slowly, "Then five years ago he died."

The silence that followed was broken by a closing door above them, and a moment later Major Blount clattered down the stairs. The major's ruddy face that seemed never to tan beneath the suns of sixty years smiled a broad welcome. He was short, inclined to heaviness, and his shirt bulged dangerously above his vest. It was, as Mrs. Blount had many times declared, a sad but scientific fact that the major looked better in uniform than in evening clothes. He boomed his greeting from across the room.

"Glad Clara asked you both to get here ahead of the mob."

Over Adela's hand he bowed his stiff military bow, and, holding Radcliffe's hand for an instant, looked up into the younger man's eyes. To Radcliffe it seemed that some momentary pain passed across the old soldier's face, vanishing as he spoke again. "Bob left a note asking us to take care of you until he gets back. It's a pleasure to do that." Abruptly he asked, "Staying long in Verdi?"

"How long I can't say. My coming has been unexpected and a little mysterious."

Again that fleeting look of pity seemed to touch the major's eyes.

Aunt Clara lighted another of her interminable cigarettes. "It was pretty low down to let you in for a formal dinner party this first night. There will be twelve of us. Adela and you are the only ones who haven't reached second childhood."

"If ever Uncle Paco hears that you are numbering him among the old and toothless," the girl warned, "there will be international complications."

Mrs. Blount turned to her guest. "We're talking about the big man of northern Mexico."

"Paco Morales?"

The woman nodded. "You know him?"

"No." Radcliffe shook his head. "But I saw him once back East. My father told me he holds this border country in the palm of his hand."

"That's true enough. But his greatest claim to immortality lies in being Adela's uncle. He is her guardian and he's finding it a life work." Aunt Clara smiled. "If Paco Morales had his way, Adela would be in a convent or—"

"Or married to Jito," added the girl with a little grimace.

Radcliffe looked quickly up. Again he remembered the vengeful look of that Mexican vaquero and the words, "*Jito, our leader, will make this gringo regret.*"

"Morales is really the government of northern Mexico wrapped up in one man," the major was saying. "It does whatever he says, and he controls practically every foot of land south of the Rio Grande back to the mountains. A man of the old Spanish blood."

"What other lords of the earth do I meet tonight?" asked Radcliffe.

"The rest," replied Aunt Clara, "are mostly deuces and treys, except, of course, your host, Don Bob."

"Bob Harkness?"

"Yes. Out here he is Don Bob. But you probably know him well."

"No. Not well at all. I couldn't have been more than six years old when I saw him last. I remember a man with black hair and eyes that were gray. Eyes that always seemed smiling, as if at some secret jest. And a soft, slow voice. I remember wondering whether he was happy or sad. He took me up once in his arms and talked to me, but I can't recall one word he said. I must have been watching those eyes, for I've never forgotten them. Where he and my father first came together I never knew. Is Don Bob raising cattle?"

"Cattle and a few horses," replied the major. "In his spare time he is director of both banks here. But he comes and goes. Often absent for days out on the range. He has land and live stock on both sides of the border line."

The voices of arriving guests called the major and his wife away, and for the first time since morning Radcliffe found himself alone with the girl. The mask of aloofness and detachment had gone. He saw again the friendly, smiling eyes that had looked into his out on the desert.

Already guests were approaching, and, leaning down, Radcliffe spoke quickly: "If I'm not allowed to sit by you at dinner, I want to warn you here and now I'm coming over to that feudal castle of your uncle's and make him let down the drawbridge some afternoon."

She laughed the same rippling laugh he had heard that morning. Raising a slender arm she pointed toward Mexico. "My friend," she replied, "there is an imaginary line about two miles south of us. You can't really see it, and the country on both sides looks the same, but that imaginary line has certain effects. Over there you move into a land of old-world things, of formal things, and very strict ordering. Even big, good-looking giants over there can't just drop in, as you Americans say. They must be invited. And when they do come, they're expected to sit and discuss the weather very learnedly with all the rest of the family."

"That must be ghastly."

"Oh no. Not ghastly. One gets used to it—or pretends to. True, there are times when I think of setting fire to the place, or eloping with one of the vaqueros, but I never really do. I just want to. And that's bad, isn't it, Ted Radcliffe?"

Someone was approaching. "But I may come just the same," he urged.

"Let's see what Uncle Paco says." Once more that impassive mask had returned to the girl's face, and she turned abruptly toward the tall man who approached them.

Paco Morales had probably looked much the same for thirty years. He was slender—almost gaunt. His skin was a kind of pallid white that accented the blackness of his eyes and his thinning hair. The hands were small and carefully kept, and his infrequent smile held a charm. His eyes, intelligently alert, rested for a moment on the big American's face, then passed to his niece, and when he spoke the voice was deep and rich. "Hiding from me, *chiquita*?"

"I've been guarding the lion of the evening for you, my uncle. This is Aunt Clara's guest of honor, Mr. Radcliffe."

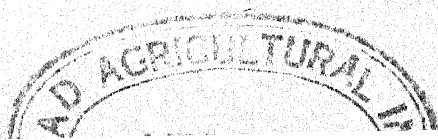
Very ceremoniously the Spaniard bowed. "I have heard of your coming, señor, I knew your father. A great man. Very—how do you say—audacious, very brilliant in the things of finance. He dreamed great dreams." The Spaniard bowed again. "You are most welcome."

"He seems to know that already," laughed the girl. "He is just warning me that he intends to come over to the hacienda."

"But certainly. We shall be charmed. You must come over next day of fiesta with Don Bob. We will show you how life is lived as our ancestors lived it since the time of the Conquerors."

"Not all our ancestors, uncle," smiled the girl.

"Not all of yours, little barbarian, but all of mine." He added in explanation: "Adela is only part Spanish.



The rest, I apologize, is Irish and Mexican. That accounts for her demon's temper."

For a moment his deep-set eyes dwelt affectionately on the girl's face, then, as if dismissing the thought that held him, he asked abruptly, "You are a friend of Don Bob, no?"

"The son of his friend. My father and Bob Harkness were partners once. And I think father once said you and he had interests together."

The Spaniard nodded. "Once, yes." For a moment his cold eyes flickered, and his lips seemed to pause on a question. But he only said: "A remarkable man, Don Bob. Perhaps the most remarkable in all this border country. He stands for everything I am opposed to—for the illusion of democracy and for the rights of the peon against his master. We hardly ever agree. Yet I have a very real affection for him. No one knows this borderland and its people so well as he."

"No one is so widely loved by the people," added Adela.

The old man nodded impatiently. "True. But I cannot include that among Don Bob's virtues. No. They love him, these vermin, because he shares their tortillas and plays with their brats—an untidy pastime. Only admissible"—he smiled slightly—"when one is running for your American Congress."

A moment later dinner was announced. But the dark eyes of Paco Morales dwelt musingly on Radcliffe long after the younger man had turned away.

CHAPTER III

WHY are men so obvious?" the major's wife asked as Radcliffe seated her at the long table.

"It's part of our sterling simplicity—but what made you think of it?"

"My husband. He makes me think of all the masculine shortcomings from time to time. Just now I can see he is bursting to break some choice piece of news. He's waiting for a clue to lead naturally up to it, and if it doesn't come soon the dear man will explode one of those new shirt studs. I suspect it has something to do with our famous bandit, El Coyote, as they call him."

"I've heard you have an untamed bandit," Radcliffe replied. He looked about him. "Has he robbed anyone here?"

The question put a sudden end to the talk. As of one accord the little group about the candlelit table turned toward Paco Morales. An air of tenseness seemed to have come upon the party. Morales alone seemed unconcerned, for he nodded toward the newcomer and smiled.

"El Coyote, yes. His chief amusement lies in robbing me. You will hear much of El Coyote, señor. The bandit most famous of the southwest border. Also he does me the honor to be my personal enemy, although I have never seen him. But his raids are almost always against me. Not too freely do men speak of him, señor, for no one knows who are his friends."

"He has friends?"

"Friends? Of a surety. Friends and followers—perhaps powerful ones. He would create a legend, this El Coyote, that he is the protector of the poor and that he steals only from the rich. *Bueno!* It is an empty gesture, to refrain from plundering paupers, no?"

"Is he American or Mexican?"

"We do not surely know, although I am certain he is American."

Blount's laugh boomed from the lower end of the table. "Morales won't ever admit the possibility that this border thief is one of his Mexican cousins."

The Spaniard raised his hands in a wide gesture. "I am sure he is not. His ways, they are not Latin ways. He has, if you will pardon me, the sudden brutality of the American bad man."

"Has no one ever seen him?"

"Not without his mask, señor. No one, that is, who has lived. We know he rides a white horse and that he carries two automatics at his side. He is one of those rare men who shoot equally well with right hand or left. But all that is what you call hearsay."

Radcliffe leaned forward. "Tell me more about him."

Morales smiled in quiet amusement. "You love adventure, no? *Bueno!* This El Coyote has gathered a band, and they live somewhere out toward the foothills in Mexico. From there they swoop down on the ranches, plundering them of cattle and sometimes of gold. In two years this bandit king has cost me many thousand pesos and the lives of six men. To me it has been an expensive form of entertainment, and the end

—*quien sabe?* The Mexican cavalry have hunted him, but they are not *fuerte*—not vigorous. Almost I think they do not want to catch him. Partly they are afraid, and partly do they sympathize.”

“Sometimes I sympathize with him myself,” murmured the major’s wife.

The Spaniard inclined his head. “It is the privilege of your charming sex to be sentimental, *señora*. But it is not a gift that makes good soldiers. Myself, I have no sympathy. Five thousand pesos I have offered for him, dead or alive. I have promised a thousand pesos for information alone. Listen. I will tell you one little story that happened only last night, and then, *señor*, you can decide whether we have here a real bandit or not. Just before dawn this morning has it taken place, and the soldiers are still keeping it secret, but I shall tell you.”

For a moment Morales regarded the silent group in the candlelight. Then again his thin lips moved. “Two nights ago Lopez, a Mexican rider, offered to guide the soldiers to where El Coyote’s camp lay. By chance or treachery the bandits had already learned of their coming and fled. The soldiers got nothing but a few abandoned horses, some blankets and embers of camp-fire. But they had learned something of the bandit’s habits. Things that may be of value. *Bueno!* In any case Lopez had earned his reward.

“Yesterday a little boy came bearing a note to Lopez. A folded paper some stranger had given him in the road, and the paper said in Spanish that before the full moon died Lopez himself would die.”

The Spaniard ceased and played idly with a few crumbs that lay before him. "Last night, under cover of darkness, Lopez came to my hacienda. He was leaving, he told me. He trembled. *Dios*, how frightened he was! There could be no safety for him in all the borderland. I gave him his thousand pesos in American gold." Again the Spaniard stopped, as if sunk in reverie.

"Well," asked the major at last. "What happened?"

"Nothing very important. Before dawn this Lopez is found in the Verdi road, a bullet through his throat and the bag of gold cut open. A few coins lay scattered over the man, as if in contempt. A gesture, no?"

He turned toward Radcliffe. "Such is our bandit. He has terrorized this land too long, and until the troops of your country will help our Mexican soldiers, I fear we will never get him. But I have good friends in Washington. Each day I am expecting word that Major Blount's cavalry will help drive out this thief and killer."

Across the table from Radcliffe a heavy, red-faced man of fifty was listening intently. He had been introduced as Dr. Price, and in the pause that followed he raised his voice. A singularly pleasant voice, it seemed to Radcliffe, with just a trace of southern drawl. "I could never see why our troops should come into the picture, Morales," he began. "This Coyote is a bandit, technically, and deeds like last night's have an ugly sound. But everybody who knows the border country will admit that if it weren't for El Coyote the little ranchers about here would have been gobbled up slick

and clean by you big fellows long ago. You would own the whole border world. As it is, this bandit, if you want to call him that, has so far kept the big fish from eating the little ones."

Morales showed no slightest sign of irritation. "*Bueno*. But perhaps the big fish believe that for the good of the border country it would do no harm if these little fish were eaten up. Today is the day of efficient things, no? You Americans have taught us that. And it is not efficient for every hundred acres of land to have a ranchhouse and family when I can control half a million acres without all the waste of money that these little ranchers bring. *Si*, long ago they would have been driven out had it not been for this El Coyote protector of theirs. This country is for great herds of cattle. It has been that since first my ancestors took it from the Indian. It is not meant to be cut up into silly farms and straggling villages. It is a country for the few and the strong."

The major had risen. His wife whispered to Radcliffe, "The time for that big speech has come."

Impressively the major coughed. "I have some interesting information for all of you," he began importantly. "It is in regard to this bandit. Señor Morales, you have long wanted the use of my cavalry in running down El Coyote. I'll admit that nothing could have given my boys more pleasure than a little bandit hunting, but that wasn't our job until we got orders to go ahead. Well, you'll be glad to know this afternoon I received telegraphic instructions from Washington to take the field until El Coyote is either killed or driven

from the country. I promise you that in one month we will have him."

A gleam of intense pleasure, a kind of animal ferocity, flared for a moment in Morales's eyes. His hands made the motion of applause. "*Bueno, bueno!* That means battle. It means—" He stopped, and, following his eyes, Radcliffe saw a figure standing in the doorway.

The major's wife touched her guest's arm.

"Don Bob," she said.

CHAPTER IV

OUTLINED against the dim light of the farther room stood an erect, slender figure in evening clothes. To Radcliffe's watching eyes there was an immense air of repose about the man, a sense of quiet confidence, coupled, just how Radcliffe couldn't say, with a great alertness. His temples were graying. His eyes moved steadily from one face to another. Quietly the man moved to his hostess's chair.

"So sorry to be late." And the voice, when he spoke, was in harmony with the impression he evoked. Clear and eager, and behind it lay that same assurance and confidence his quiet eyes spoke of.

The major waved him toward a seat, but Don Bob had already seen Radcliffe and stepped forward. Unhesitatingly he grasped the younger man's hand.

"It's good to see you, Ted." With a swift glance he appraised the straight, strong body and nodded in silent approval. "I'd hate to try lifting you to my shoulder now, Ted. The years have done well by you. You—yes, you look like your father, but so much bigger." Again he laid a hand on Radcliffe's shoulder, then passed to his seat.

"There's a separate portion of Hell reserved for late dinner guests," Aunt Clara scolded, as the man took his place at her left.

"Hell enough to know I've missed at least two courses of the best dinner in Verdi. Dreadfully sorry. I made the last three miles from the ranch in ten min-

utes over that broken-down cow trail." Don Bob raised his eyes to the major. "But what was that impassioned speech I interrupted?"

And Blount, ever eager to pass on his morsel of news, replied: "The United States government, which in my small capacity I serve, is tired of El Coyote's playfulness. Tomorrow the cavalry and I take the field in Mexico."

Don Bob's eyebrows raised. "How can you go hunting there?"

"We'll ask permission from the Mexican authorities to hunt the bandit wherever he goes."

Confidently Morales added: "The Mexican cavalry will give whatever you ask. I can answer for that." With a gesture of dismissal the Spaniard turned toward Don Bob. "Important news, eh, Don Bob?"

But Dr. Price interrupted. "That sort of thing plumb wearies me—if you don't mind my saying so. What have we to do with El Coyote so long as he keeps away from property on this side of the line? It's just making Blount's cavalry a private detective agency for Morales."

The major was non-committal. "All that may or may not be true. But I'll be glad of a little activity for the boys. Personally, I don't give a single damn one way or another, but running him down will add a little variety to life."

"That's no good reason," objected the doctor.

Don Bob smiled. "It's the best of reasons, Price. Man hunting has always been a popular sport. Besides, we all believe that our mysterious Coyote is an Amer-

ican, and why shouldn't Americans have the fun of killing him?"

"Will they catch him?" asked Adela.

"Oh, as to that," Dr. Price considered a moment. "They may not catch him, my dear, but in any case I think it means the end of El Coyote."

"How?" Several voices asked in unison.

"Well, it makes the odds against him too strong. The Mexican soldiers weren't really dangerous. They actually sympathize with him, for, after all, they are peons, and it is the peons that El Coyote has always befriended. But for our soldiers the chase will be just a game, and they will give tongue like a pack of hounds smelling blood."

"Of course we'll get him," added the major confidently. "So far as the merits of your disagreement go, I haven't an opinion in the world. El Coyote may be a noble protector of the poor or just a plain cattle thief. All I know is I'm under orders to run down a bandit gang, and, believe me, I welcome any change from drill and monotony."

"Have you heard of last night's murder, Bob?" asked the doctor.

"No."

"A peon gave information on the bandit and collected Morales's thousand dollars. That same night he was found by a squad of Mexican soldiers dead in the trail."

Don Bob nodded thoughtfully. "That would happen, of course. Did the Coyote leave any souvenir?"

Again Morales raised expressive hands. "That is

most interesting. The soldiers found Lopez's body just below where the road pitches down from the mesa. They dismounted. Picture, my friends, that group, so silent in the moonlight, looking down on one who the night before had guided them to the bandit camp. In black fear they stood there. Then from the cliff someone laughed, and there they see on his white horse El Coyote watching them. He waved, he laughed again, that jester, he threw down a handful of the gold coins he had taken, and he was gone. Is it not contempt for all of us he holds, this killer and cattle thief?"

"He seems to go in for melodrama and Belasco stuff," commented the major.

Price shook his head. "Not a bit of it. But he knows the effect of that sort of thing on both his enemies and friends. Lord, man, it seizes the imagination! Remember last Easter Sunday? You couldn't beat that, could you?"

"What happened?" asked Radcliffe.

"Easter," Price explained, "is one day when every Mexican goes to church, if he has to walk twenty miles to make it. That morning the little church over at Rio Dulce was jammed. All morning the bells had been ringing. Then, just before services, a horse galloped up to the door and El Coyote, masked and spurred, stood in the doorway with his two guns at his side. Five thousand pesos on his head, and there he stood alone! He walked slowly down the long aisle, laid an offering of gold pesos before the little altar and as quietly walked out. Not a man moved. Not one raised hand! What a gesture that was, eh? Bravado and melodrama,

if you want, but it meant that in every peon hut along the border a secret prayer was raised that day for his safety, and the effect is, as Señor Morales points out, the soldiers aren't half eager to find him, and no one is willing to give information."

The major expanded his broad chest. "Well, legends and white horses won't annoy *my* boys very deeply."

"No," agreed the doctor, testily. "They'll carry out their orders in the brave and blundering manner of all good soldiers."

"You couldn't speak with deeper feeling if you were married to one," observed Aunt Clara, and led her guests to the drawing-room.

But as the major passed through the hall, Don Bob's hand closed on the old soldier's arm. "Ted hasn't heard?" he asked in a low tone.

"Not a word."

The quiet gray eyes rested for a moment on the major's face. "I'll tell him tonight," he said at last, and slowly walked across the room to where Radcliffe stood beside Adela Morales's chair. For a time he looked thoughtfully at the powerful figure, the sweep of the shoulders, the giant column of his neck and thick, close-cropped hair. He stepped forward and laid his hand lightly on Ted's shoulder.

"Rotten luck I had to be out of town when you arrived. Something imperative. Then this little girl came to my rescue, and Aunt Clara promised to see that you wouldn't be bored tonight."

"I've been treated like an old friend because everyone remembers dad. I was telling Miss Morales a little

about him. You'd have loved him." He looked for confirmation at Don Bob. "Wouldn't she?"

"All women had a way of loving your father—he was extremely lovable."

Something in the man's voice made Radcliffe look down at the erect figure beside him. A sudden flood of memory swept over him. He remembered hearing of the man who had loved his mother once and who later, when she married his father, had disappeared into the West. He realized now who that man had been. Yet it seemed unreal and unbelievably sad that this man with graying hair had once loved and suffered and been young. So, for a queer, swift moment those two men looked at each other, each conscious that he held in his brain a knowledge that could bring the other pain.

The girl broke the silence. "It's been long weeks since you came to the hacienda, Bob. Don't dare forget that next Saturday is our Fiesta of the Rains. And bring your tenderfoot giant."

Don Bob smiled and hurried across the room to help Aunt Clara with the bridge tables.

"The man who invented these self-collapsing tables was an enemy of society," Aunt Clara complained. She yielded the table to Don Bob. "See if you can unravel that damned thing while I get the cards."

Lost in thought Radcliffe still stood beside the girl. She watched his calm, steady eyes following Don Bob. Then again she saw his eyes twinkle. "If I come to your fiesta will you take me riding?" he asked.

"Perhaps," the girl answered. "Yes, I'll take you riding, Ted Radcliffe—at least once." And she turned away.

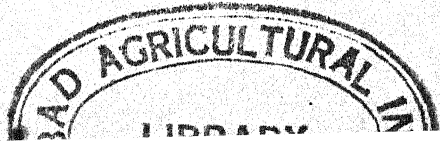
A moment later Adela found herself at the table of her hostess.

"Out here in the great open spaces we never gossip," Aunt Clara began, while the cards were being dealt. "But I was just wondering in my arch fashion what must happen if two very big and very spoiled young men of different nationalities should fall in love with the same girl. It might result, you know, in some amazing fireworks."

Adela sighed. "You always think of the most interesting possibilities. But I wonder if your American giant could be touched by this thing called love. Are we playing contract, dear, or auction?"

"Contract. All except the major, and he's never been able to detect any difference." She smiled approvingly at her cards. "Two without."

For more than an hour the flick of cards and the deliberate bidding of the players were the only sounds. Twice on the path outside the slow, even tread of a sentry rose and died away. Then from out the silence horses' hoofs pounded on the hard gravel walk. They clattered sharply to a halt, and at a word of command spurs clanked on the porch steps just as the major opened the door. A cavalry sergeant stood before him, and after a word the two stepped into the night. Inside, the guests caught only a low rumble of the two men's voices, but all playing had ceased, and each one sat looking expectantly toward the door—all except Don Bob, whose impassive face still regarded the cards before him. At last the major entered, visibly the proud bearer of news. He took a step forward, cleared his throat, then turned and closed the door impressively,



just as Aunt Clara's warning voice broke the expectant silence.

"Better tell it, major. That shirt stud can't stand the strain much longer."

The old soldier tried to combine a smile of assurance to his guests with a withering glare of disapproval at his wife.

"Nothing important," he began, making his voice elaborately casual. "The boys captured a Mexican skulking around the corrals. He's wounded slightly, and I want Dr. Price to have a look at him in the office."

"How was he wounded?"

"They're not sure. When the Mexican cavalry raided El Coyote's camp one man was seen making off among the mesquite. The Mexicans fired on him, without effect. When the boys captured this chap he crumpled and they found a deep flesh wound in his leg. It's just possible that we've got one of El Coyote's men. So if it isn't asking too much, I'd like Señor Morales and Don Bob to take a look at him. We may learn something."

"I suppose," commented Aunt Clara grimly, "this is your idea of how to conduct a bridge game?"

"Dear, a soldier—"

"Don't finish it! I know. I'm going to set that speech to music some day." She turned to Dr. Price. "You'll find bandages in the desk near the table. Call me if there is anything else. And leave Ted Radcliffe here in case the rest of El Coyote's band drop in for a hand of contract."

Silently the four men walked out into the night,

following the flagstone walk to where a clump of tamarisk flanked the low building which all Verdi knew as the major's office. The soldiers had halted inside with their prisoner, and as the major switched on the lights all eyes turned toward the captive, standing between two tall troopers. He was small, very dirty, and his eyes drooped either with pain or with weariness. The weight of his body rested on the left leg. Dr. Price stepped forward.

"Speak English?"

The Mexican shook his head.

"They never speak English until they want something," the doctor muttered. Then, to Morales: "Please tell him to sit down there. Tell him I may hurt him a little. Bob, fill that basin, will you?"

Swiftly the doctor cut the cloth from about the wound and examined the discolored flesh. Once the man gave a sharp sigh of pain, and Bob put a lighted cigarette between his lips. In mute thanks the Mexican's heavy eyes were raised to the face of Don Bob, then lowered again.

"Anyone here ever seen him?" asked the major.

Morales and Don Bob regarded him closely.

"Never," said Morales at last.

Don Bob shrugged his shoulders. "His face looks familiar, but one can't be sure. Will he talk?"

"The soldiers can't speak Spanish. Let's see what Morales can get out of him."

"Where do you come from?" began Morales in Spanish.

The captive made no reply.

"Answer me. Where are you from? What is your name?"

Again silence, and the flush on the major's face deepened.

"A few days in the guard-house may help him remember." Then to a soldier, "Search his pockets."

Quickly the contents of the peon's coat were spread on the table. A bag of tobacco, crumpled cigarette papers and matches, a bundle of rawhide string—the soldier gave a quick whistle of surprise. "That bird's sure well-heeled." He held up two twenty-dollar gold pieces.

Instantly Morales pounced on them. "*Dios y Maria!*" He carried them nearer the light. "Almost I could swear to it."

"Swear what?" The major's voice was eager.

"That they are of the same bag I paid Lopez."

"You mean every gold piece was marked?"

"No. Not marked. I grant, of course, there are other twenty-dollar gold pieces in the world, but see, these are new—as were the ones I had from the bank. And what would this dog be doing with two pieces of gold? I think, major, you have caught one of El Coyote's band."

"Perhaps El Coyote himself," suggested Don Bob, smiling.

"Hardly that." The Spaniard looked menacingly down at the captive. "If one could only make this swine speak. At my hacienda he would of a sureness speak."

Dr. Price had finished his bandaging. "The wound doesn't look bad. Bullet's touched the bone and the

whole thing's inflamed. Don't move him any more to-night. He's had enough. Can you keep him here?"

"He'd be safer in the guardhouse."

"Hell, a man with a leg like that isn't going to break any long distance records. Can't you lock him here and put twenty or thirty non-coms over him?"

Blount smiled at his friend's impatience. "All right. I'll have the guard keep an eye on him. We may want a long talk with this fellow tomorrow before I start after El Coyote. Well, let's go back to the house."

Inside, Major Blount confined his tale to the bare fact that the Mexican had been wounded in the leg by someone unknown.

"Probably the girl's husband," suggested Aunt Clara hopefully, and there the matter rested. But it was too late to resume bridge, and so a few minutes later Radcliffe found himself laying Adela's cloak about her shoulders.

"I'm wondering," he said without a smile, "if tomorrow I'll wake up and discover you never existed."

She looked up at him, so close he caught again the fragrance of her hair, and her eyes were a little mocking. "Perhaps the me you have created never did exist. At any rate, dear stranger, come to us next fiesta. And now, as we say in my country, '*Hasta la vista.*'" She touched his hand in a little gesture of farewell, and followed her uncle out into the night.

As he stood looking after her, Don Bob joined him. "We've a lot to talk about before you go to bed to-night. Let's be going."

To Radcliffe the voice of the older man sounded

suddenly weary, and in a few moments they had taken leave of the Blounts.

Radcliffe settled back as Don Bob drove rapidly over the long, moonlit road past Verdi. From unseen gardens floated the scent of jasmine and the pungent odor of mesquite, and as they left the town behind them he breathed again the hot, dry desert air. Dimly he caught the silver outlines of far-off hills, marking that vague, mysterious land of old Mexico.

He wanted to talk, but the graying man beside him seemed so sternly silent, and somehow forbidding. He leaned forward to light a cigarette and was aware that the other's eyes were on him.

"What were you thinking, Ted?" the older man asked.

"Just then I was thinking of the freedom of life out here and the friendliness of everyone, and I recalled something dad once said—that if you trust life—trust it absolutely and with utter faith—it never lets you down. He was right, wasn't he?"

For a time there was no reply. Only the whir of the wheels on the smooth road. Then, as if from very far away came the quiet voice of Don Bob.

"I'd give my right arm, Ted, if I could say yes to that. But, instead, I'm going to tell you something tonight that will make you lose that trust in the kindness of this world. It's a message that is going to strip you of everything you've ever had. Even," he added sorrowfully, "even your memories."

CHAPTER V

BEFORE Radcliffe could answer Don Bob had stopped before the ranchhouse and hurried him up the steps.

A Mexican servant dozed in a corner, and with a nod Don Bob dismissed him, then going to the fireplace threw sticks of fragrant mesquite on the embers. He pointed to a deep leather chair.

"Sit down, Ted. There are cigarettes and pipe tobacco."

For a time he busied himself with the glowing logs while Radcliffe watched him closely. "It's about father?" the younger man asked at last.

Bob slowly filled his pipe, then sat before the fire.

"Yes, part of it's about your father. But most of it is about you. Up until the time your father died, just how much did you know about his affairs?"

"Nothing except that they were perfectly sound. He always had the strongest kind of backing."

"He was a great gambler, remember. I mean in the big, adventurous sense."

"He loved to experiment and try what others never dared. He was always willing to back his judgment with his last penny. If that's what you mean, yes, he was a gambler. And why not? There was always his own fortune of a good many millions behind him."

The man opposite was silent for a time, then at last he said quietly: "I had a letter from your father just before he died five years ago. Things had broken badly.

He had put everything into a number of new ventures. Most of it was in those big Mexican plans of his. Then, without warning, the Mexican government canceled its agreement for that power project and withdrew his permit for the irrigation work. As a result all those hundreds of square miles he had leased became overnight just so much valueless sand. Then came a quick panic of early spring. It caught him. It wiped him out."

"Ruined?" The whispered word seemed to linger in the quiet room.

"Utterly. I think it broke his heart. Not just the money, not that, but the death of all his plans, the crashing of twenty years of work and dreams." Bob's long fingers drummed on the chair and his eyes followed the rising sparks as they swarmed up the chimney place. "His first thought was to keep it all from you," he added softly.

"But didn't he know—he must have known—that I'd rather a thousand times have faced the music with him?"

"I don't believe he could have endured your seeing him beaten. I think he wanted always to remain the big, successful demigod of your childhood—until the end. And the end came in six months. But before your father died he had paid off every cent. It left him with a few scant thousand dollars, and these he turned over to his bankers. They were to put you through school and give you those two years abroad."

Radcliffe's grim face looked up. "And I thought it was just an allowance."

"It took every penny your father owned. Well, it was his wish that you should have those years unclouded. And now you've had them."

A silence, broken only by the crackling logs, while slowly the first realization of it all crept in upon the man.

The world was tumbling about him. That great stalwart father of his, with all his power, the very symbol of power and success—the idol of his childhood, had ceased to exist.

Radcliffe shook his head, as if to rid himself of this nightmare. It couldn't be true—life wasn't like that.

Suddenly he found himself walking the length of the room. "It's not real," he said once. "I suppose, tomorrow, I'll accept it—I'll have to. But now it's as if it all were happening to someone else—while I stand by and watch." He whirled back toward the quietly seated figure. "But why did he send me out here to learn all this?"

"For two reasons. First, he wanted me rather than a stranger to tell you. And second, he wanted me to give you this." Don Bob walked to his desk and held up a long envelope. "His last word to you."

Radcliffe's fingers closed gently, almost reluctantly, on the envelope, and for an instant his eyes dimmed to see his own name written there in that careless heavy scrawl of his father's. It was like a voice out of the past grown suddenly articulate—a whispered word from the dead. Motionless he stood there, then felt Bob's hand laid on his shoulder, and while the firelight flickered on their steady faces those two men stood

looking into each other's eyes. Behind them a clock chimed midnight. It had a quality, that moment, the quality of a bond between them, and in graver times they were both to think of it again. Very slowly he tore open the envelope.

At last he raised his eyes from the closely written pages and spoke in a voice that tried ineffectually to be calm. "I can't read it all to you—it's like dad talking once again about his plans for me and the things we were to do together." His voice stopped, then went on. "And it tells all you've already told me, but at the end dad says this: 'I have a reason for sending you out there. Bob may guess it. Especially when I say it has to do with Paco Morales. Study him, Ted, my boy. He is an education, old Morales. But his tuition is sometimes a little high.'"

For a moment Radcliffe looked at Don Bob, then read on: "'I want you to be happy as I have been happy. I want you to be true to yourself—there is no other success in life. My love to you always—'"

The voice stopped abruptly. He folded the letter and after a long silence asked, "What does father mean about Morales?"

The older man mused over his cigarette. "Ted," he said at last, "if the real story of your father's downfall is ever told, we're going to find that Morales played some part in it. I know how the man works. I know, too, he was supposed to stand behind your father's development plans in Mexico with money and, what is more important, with his influence over the Mexican government. I believe the old Spaniard promised your

father full support, and then, when the time came that he needed support, Morales withheld his money and turned the government against the work. That meant the end."

"But father's plan was for irrigation. His dreams were of a great ditch that would bring water to the desert and change this dry cattle country to farms. Wouldn't that have benefited Morales's land?"

"The land, yes. But not Morales. Legally Morales owns not over ten thousand acres about the hacienda. But by the terror of his vaqueros he is king of more than a million. And of course Morales pays a little to the proper officials to keep the thing quiet. So you see that to bring prosperity and people to this land would mean the end of Morales's reign."

Ted made no answer. He looked again at the letter, and for a moment everything seemed swept from beneath his feet. His future plans, his hopes, had been dashed away. He was a pauper. The thought made him look up. "Two hours ago I thought I was a rich man. I could command wealth. I could do with my life just what I wanted. Now I'm a charity guest of yours. Why, I haven't five hundred dollars to my name, and I can't stay here."

Bob shook his head. "You've got to stay here. Ted, if you go before we've had a chance to talk and plan, I'll think rather poorly of my old friend's son. We'll build again, you and I. For the next week we'll ride and talk and lay our campaign. I can do something, old man. You've got to let me."

Caught up by the earnestness in the man's voice,

Ted laid both hands on Bob's shoulder. "Thank God you are here. It's all so unreal. And tonight I can't see much ahead."

A dying ember clattered noisily on the hearth. Bob walked toward the door and once more his voice had recovered its old matter-of-fact quality.

"There's rye and Scotch in that cabinet, Ted. You've been through a dark place in your life tonight, and in a few hours it will be dawn. Let's think of it as a real dawn. Meanwhile, I've got something that has to be done before the sun rises, so don't wait up."

Again Radcliffe's eyes watched the graying logs. He seemed to be talking to the fireplace. "Queer," he said, "I can't feel sorry for dad. I can't find pity for him. He was too fine for pity."

But the quiet voice only answered: "I think I knew your father even better than you. And I know, too, something of the feeling that makes a gambler of a man, and makes him willing to stake everything, perhaps even the things he has no right to stake. And now, good night."

The footsteps of Don Bob died down the path. Within the house it had grown suddenly cold. A resinous branch of mesquite hissed noisily and still the man stood brooding before the hearth, with somber, unseeing eyes fixed on the flickering fire.

A chapter closed. The chapter of his first youth had closed. For the first time a sense of the great uncertainty of life came over him, a sense of the vast, unreasoning tyranny of fortune. At last, something like a sigh escaped him, and turning away he dropped his cigarette among the dying coals.

All life would be different now. Doors were closing on him that had once been opened wide. He looked up. Well, one had to sleep. Even paupers. But at the door of the bedroom he looked back and raised his clenched hand toward the unheeding darkness outside.

"You got dad, damn you," he said slowly. "Now let's see if you can get me."

FOR Ted that night always remained a memory of racing, waking thoughts; a nightmare of fantastic dreams. His life, the life that had been forever taken away, passed before him in confusion: the days of poverty on the streets of Denver, the better days of college, the days of wealth. Like bright, brief pictures in the darkness the pageant of his yesterdays passed.

He turned the hot pillow. At last, throwing back the covers, he went to the window and lighted a cigarette. So his father had trusted too much—trusted life, and people, and himself. Then life had let him down. Life—and Morales. Yet, strangely, the word evoked not the austere face of the Spaniard, but the ivory-pale features of the girl. Illusive and haunting, she seemed to smile—but with a smile not wholly gay. Adela Morales. That, too, was past. Past before it had begun.

He may have slept. Suddenly he found himself sitting bolt upright, looking out on the first red shafts of light that crept over the desert. That ache of loneliness had gone, and the long fight of the night had left him with a new sense of mastery. The path ahead lay clear. He was to carry on—to face whatever the future might bring.

A breeze from the window fanned his cheeks, bringing the promise of spring and the faint fragrance of jasmine. He breathed deeply, knowing the black night had forever passed, and with it the blackness of his pain. All life lay before him, bidding him build again.

He would look a hostile world in the face and carve a place for himself. And then—his lips tightened—he would come to grips with the forces that had meant his father's ruin. And in some unreasoned way he felt that this too was part of his father's plans.

A servant brought fruit and coffee, and a half-hour later Ted found Bob on the porch, listening in amused silence to a very wrathful major. The old soldier was embellishing his talk with the hand-picked profanity of ten army generations.

As Radcliffe approached Bob smiled up at him. "The major has news for us. Tell him, Blount."

"It's about that damned Mexican captive. He got away!"

"But the fellow was wounded," protested Radcliffe. "He couldn't have got away!"

"Of course he couldn't. Not alone. He had help. Someone was keeping watch. All night someone must have kept watch—even while we were out there he may have had his eyes on us. Sweet piece of business, eh? The guard looked in at midnight and saw the greaser's boots sticking out beneath the blanket. He flashed on the light and the fellow lay there all quiet, with his eyes closed. Every two hours after that the guard looked in and the boots were still there. And this morning those damned boots were still there, but, by the Lord, that Mexican wasn't. He had taken them off, stuck them neatly outside the blanket, and vanished. Somebody came for him, smashed the lock, and carried him away." Again the old soldier called down eternal maledictions on his fortune. "He was our best

bet, that peon—our only bet. And now he's gone. Vanished. And my wife is already spreading the news over Verdi as gleefully as if she just had a set of twins."

A sudden recollection turned the major's reddened face a delicate purple. "On the way out I met Dr. Price and told him about it. Do you know what he said?"

Both men shook their heads.

"He said, 'I thought someone would call for your captive.' 'Then why in hell didn't you say so last night?' I asked. 'Oh, I never believe in interfering with military matters,' he grinned back. That was the only answer I could get."

"It's uncanny," Blount burst out afresh. "That bandit has friends everywhere. We all know half the border people are in secret league with him. But here in Verdi—I never realized."

"My friend," Don Bob said solemnly, "you had better realize it if you ever expect to capture El Coyote. Your most secret plans are going to be known to him, your movements, your reports. He probably knows where you are at this moment. So, for you, major, I predict an interesting chase, but I hardly predict success."

As if stung to instant action, the major rose and clattered down the steps to his horse. He climbed into the saddle and called back: "I'll lay you a dinner that before I'm done I capture or kill this all-seeing bandit of yours."

"Taken," laughed Don Bob. For a time he watched the retreating figure of the old soldier. "You know,"—he turned toward Ted—"I sometimes envy that man.

Never once in his long past has he been assailed by doubts, either of himself or of his destiny. How simple all that must make life."

Ted nodded. "I wonder if life ever can be simple. Just now I was wondering how one begins to build it up again—in your words—from the very beginning."

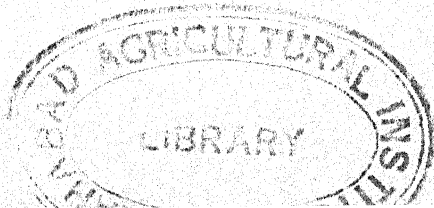
"It's not so hard. Your father did it twice. I've done it. When I was just about your age my whole world was knocked from beneath my feet. And I got over it, although,"—he smiled his quiet smile—"some scars do remain."

"I'm willing to face it—and the scars too. Only, where do we begin? You know I'll never be willing just to live on you."

"Who wants you to? Perhaps I need you more than you need me. Yes, don't smile. Right now, Ted, I need a foreman, the kind of man I can make a partner of, that I can trust and bank on everlastingly. If you are your father's son, that man is you."

Radcliffe was looking out over the desert. For a moment his steady eyes softened. "I'm not going to try to thank you, Bob," he said at last. "But I wonder if I'd be a safe kind of foreman for anyone to take on just now. It came to me this morning that dad sent me out here as a test. I think he wants me to carry on the fight. I remember once he said, 'The greatest inheritance I could leave you would be a good scrap on your hands.' No, Bob, your new foreman sooner or later may clash with Morales."

"A fight with the power of Paco Morales should be big enough to suit anyone, but I think we could stand



it. So let's call it settled. Work for me and it will give you your best chance to get around and dig things out. For above all things you've got to avoid suspicion. Remember, there's no sacred regard for life out here—especially across the border. You'll be a great deal safer as one of my cowpunchers, earning his day's wages."

Ted nodded. "There's one thing I want to learn. I remember dad talked once of a piece of land over in Mexico that he either owned or controlled. It had a name, that land. Last night I tried to remember it and all this morning, but I can't. Do you know about it?"

Bob shook his head. "I don't believe your father owned a foot of land in Mexico. Once he held thousands of acres in the form of governmental concessions, but these were later taken from him. If he owned any—which I doubt—it would be hard to find. There's no complete record kept of land ownership across the border, and it won't do to ask too many questions. Still, isn't that another reason why it'll be better for you to take the job of head rider for Don Bob? Now for the sordid details: I'll start you with the magnificent salary of one hundred a month and keep. You can handle a horse and a gun. I'll teach you to handle men. In six months, if Jito and Morales spare you, I'll have the best foreman on the border."

As he spoke, Don Bob buckled on his spurs. "I'm off to the upper ranch. And remember, at noon tomorrow we drive over to Morales's for the big fiesta." He turned down the steps. "One thing more." Bob's eyes again had grown earnest. "Do nothing that will make

an enemy of Morales yet. I have certain plans of my own. And in the meantime, remember the wise old Mexican proverb, 'Smiles make even the cactus bloom.' Adios."

CHAPTER VII

IT must have been late that night when Bob returned, for Radcliffe saw no more of him until the following morning when, as they sat over a late breakfast, Dr. Price joined them for coffee and a smoke.

"No gossip or scandals"—the doctor laughed and threw himself into a chair—"except that the major still believes I had something to do with the escape of that Mexican. Just now he's all overheated about catching El Coyote."

Ted looked up. "No one seems to agree about this bandit. Is he really a killer?"

The doctor nodded over his coffee. "Sure. He has to be. You've got to remember El Coyote is an absolutely logical individual. His is a deadly kind of logic. Whoever endangers his fight against the system dies."

"But just what is the system that El Coyote hates so?"

"Over across the line," Price answered slowly, "the man who owns an acre or twenty acres is little better than a vassal of the big fellow. Your big fellow dictates. Your little man wants to run a few head of cattle; wants to raise a handful of food about his ranch; wants to have a home. The big man, with his cowboys, forces the little fellow away from the waterholes, overrides the best of his range, tramples his fields. What can the little fellow do? The law—there's no law down here that can take care of a poor man against one of these well-entrenched lords of the land. Look what

happened night before last. Morales has finally succeeded in getting the United States government to declare El Coyote an outlaw. It makes me damned tired. What we are really doing is helping Morales keep this land enslaved until he owns every peon, body and soul."

"How does Morales go about it?"

"In a thousand ways. There are plenty of ways of bullying a lone man and his family when you have a hundred cowboys at your back. Ways of making his waterholes unfit to drink, and ways of stampeding his steers or driving them across his farm crops. They've all been tried. There have been clashes and some shooting. And the little fellow always got the worst of it until El Coyote came. Then one fine day he appeared from somewhere—no one knows where—gathered a band of followers, and served notice that the border country was meant for men, not cattle."

"But can he carry it through?"

"No one knows. But listen: not long ago some of Morales's outfit set fire to the haystack of a farmer down in the valley. They figured if they destroyed his cattle feed the farmer would have to move out—that would mean more range for Morales. El Coyote promptly sent word that unless Morales paid the man five hundred pesos he would regret it. Morales sat tight and swore by all his saints he would see the Coyote in hell. Well, we all waited, pretty sure something would blow up. The following week two of Morales's barns were burned, and a day or two later one of Morales's paymasters was halted and exactly five hundred pesos

taken. No more, no less, just five hundred pesos." Price smiled. "That's the kind of thing that keeps the heart beating in the little rancher."

"How much of this does Adela know?" Radcliffe asked after a little pause.

Price shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Well, after all, one doesn't tell a girl that her uncle is a damned scoundrel. Adela herself has done much to help the people, and they adore her. Half of the girl babies around the hacienda are named after her. Still, it can't be a gay life for her. That may be why she is different from any girl I have ever known. At times she is very Spanish, at times almost American. I've known her since she was a long-legged kid, riding the wildest of her uncle's horses and swearing like one of his vaqueros. You've only seen her on her good behavior. Watch her when someone crosses the will of that little border queen, eh, Bob?"

"Just where does this man Jito fit into the picture?"

Price smiled and looked toward Don Bob. "Border rumor has it he's a left-hand son of Morales," Bob replied. "At any rate, it's certain he's chief bully for Morales. Jito is a man of some education, and famous throughout the border for his strength. You'll see him this afternoon at the fiesta. A great hulk of a man, big as you, I should say, perhaps heavier, with a thick, bull neck and a pleasant smile and a way of making himself feared by every peon as only the Devil is feared."

"He lives at Morales's hacienda?" Ted asked.

Don Bob nodded. "Surely. Morales entrusts all his

affairs to him. He's a kind of general manager over there. It's a perfect combination in a way—Morales the brains and Jito the courage and brawn."

Ted thought for a while. "It was about this Jito I heard Aunt Clara joking Adela Morales."

"Perhaps."

"Are they—"

"No." Bob interrupted the unfinished question. "Jito has always been a kind of watchdog for Adela. He's absolutely devoted. I suppose he loves her. In the end she may marry him. Who ever knows about a woman? It may be one of Morales's wishes, and in a sense it would be the fitting thing."

"I'm damned if it would," Radcliffe burst out.

Both men looked up in mild surprise. "Why not?"

"Why should it be fitting for a girl like Adela to marry a hired bully?"

"You do Jito an injustice, old son," Bob answered. "He's much more than that. Jito is a born leader, even if his methods are crude. He is a man absolutely without fear, glorying in his great physical strength. As a matter of fact, it is the utter dread these border people have for Jito that is old Morales's trump card."

For a moment Ted was silent, his eyes fixed on the desert sky. "Then one of the ways to strike at Morales would be through Jito," he answered thoughtfully.

Price had been watching Radcliffe. He saw the long line of Ted's chin tighten and the eyes grow hard. The doctor rose. "Whoever strikes at Jito, or Morales either, must be prepared for everything from persecu-

tion to cold, relentless murder. Those two could turn all hell loose on an enemy."

Then once more he looked at the big, brooding man before him and reached for his hat. "But I'd wish him luck," the doctor added. "By the Lord, he'd need it."

CHAPTER VIII

UNREST, like a formless cloud, had been spreading throughout the border country. None knew what plans and counterplans lay behind it. None knew when the storm would break, or where, but throughout the last winter the name of El Coyote had never been far from the minds of the border ranchers. At Mendoza's cantina, that clearing house for all news of the desert, rumors came and went. Lean, silent horsemen rode in from the ranches, talked awhile, drank, and silently mounted their horses again. Tanned men of the ranges passed each other with a nod of understanding, but only their eyes spoke, of things their lips found too dangerous to voice. Meanwhile from Verdi to the foothills and west to the little village of Agua Dulce went the whispered word, "Prepare."

For days Morales' vaqueros had worn anxious looks. They were less eager of late to kick the despised peons from their paths. In the villages and at the cantinas they kept apart, gathering in little groups, and riding the range in threes and fours instead of singly. And all this because of those persistent rumors that whispered El Coyote was organizing the Mexican ranchers, that armed resistance was coming, and that the power of Morales was drawing to an end.

Wilder rumors still there were, that rose and died. Most of those whispered fantastic tales were baseless, but they all served one purpose. They were making the desert ranchers intolerant of the domination of Mo-

rales. Those once patient peons—a wave of unrest had swept across their hearts, had changed them and left them looking with new eyes out over the far horizon and thoughtfully fingering the knives at their belts.

Already, here and there, in little villages, a few leaders spoke more boldly, men who all but said they were under the protection of El Coyote and were ready to follow him in any test of strength against the power of Morales. Even in Verdi there were those who hinted that this man or that was a leader of El Coyote's band, but none said it openly. Meanwhile those vague clouds of impending conflict deepened, and the vaqueros of Morales continued to ride in threes and fours.

At length, among a few of these leaders, and among the ranchers who could be trusted, word went out of a meeting to be held at the Cantina Azul, a little tavern by the crossroads south of Verdi.

None knew when. But a week later, just before sunset, horsemen galloped up to certain desert and foothill ranches and, calling softly, "Tonight, *amigo*," rode swiftly away. At the summons men armed themselves and saddled their swiftest horses. They rode silently, talking little, watchful, alert. Many of them in a sense were already of El Coyote's men, for they had ridden with his band, had helped them, although no one of those who rode southward that night beneath the stars had ever looked upon the leader's face.

Not for long years had the border country seen such an array as met that evening at the Cantina Azul. Their numbers were not impressive, for barely a hun-

dred men had gathered there, but each grim-faced one of them was well chosen. Each had good reason to hate the dominance of Morales's men. Each had sworn to follow any leader who would end it. A varied throng. Swarthy, thick-set Mexicans, with here and there a wind-tanned American rancher—men from the foothills, the border, and the desert, all of them held by a common bond, and in the eyes of each the steady gaze of steadfast purpose.

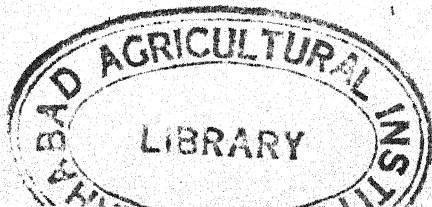
Crowding into the patio of the cantina, they squatted about or leaned against the adobe walls, and as they waited in the darkness, the tips of their cigarettes glowed red. Perhaps for half an hour they waited, then from down the hard-packed road came the sound of horses' feet, and a masked rider forced his way among them.

A rancher standing on tiptoe strained forward. "Is it he, is it El Coyote?" he whispered.

"Quiet, *amigo*," another answered. "El Coyote does not come tonight. This man brings his message. For the love of Our Lady be quiet there."

The masked rider circled about the patio, bending a careful scrutiny upon all he passed. At the farther end he stopped and faced them. In the dim light men saw that the jaw was square and clean shaven and that beneath the sombrero clustered a thick mat of grizzled hair. Several among the crowd nodded. "It is the lieutenant of El Coyote"—and for a moment the little patio rang with an eager shout of welcome to this man of the border outlaw's band.

When he spoke his clear voice, in contrast to the



grizzled hair, held something of the quality of youth, and the fearlessness of youth.

"*Compañeros*," he began, "you whom El Coyote trusts he has called together. There are many among you who are already of our band. We have ridden together and together we have held back the vaqueros of Morales. Many of you I know well. We have shared dangers. But it is better that tonight we be strangers all. It may be that among you are also men of Morales's band. If there be, take back our message of defiance to your master. And remember that with such as you comes a reckoning.

"Tonight to all of you I bring a message from El Coyote. He would have me say these words: Men of the border, you came here to lead free, happy lives. You came to build homes and to live in peace and in peace to see your children grow up among you. What has that hope of yours been worth? How much has life itself been worth since the horsemen of Morales have made dogs of us? Throughout the border there are many piles of ashes that once were homes. There are graves that cover men who were once our friends. And all because Morales would have this land. Today the government itself obeys Morales. It sends troops against El Coyote and brands him an outlaw. But names are nothing, for if all the countryside arises and stands behind El Coyote and fights for him, he will no longer be an outlaw in the eyes of the Mexican government; he will become what today he really is—a liberator and a friend. Already many have joined him.

"He waits now only a little while before he strikes. *Compañeros*, if you have red blood, you who listen here tonight will follow him in this last great fight of all. Too long we have struck back feebly. We have fought half-heartedly. We have only resisted where we should have attacked. We have been weak where we should have been strong. We have been divided where we should have been one."

"*Bueno*," cried one from the crowd. "You speak straight words, *amigo*. Tell us now what we should do."

"Fight," called the clear, unhesitating voice. "At a certain time El Coyote gathers together all his band and rides against the power of Morales. On that ride whoever is not with him is against him. It is the people of the border against Morales and his *vaqueros*."

"Pass that word among you to those who are trustworthy. Be ready. Look to your rifles and the knives at your belts. You must be leaders among the people. Tell the strong men to be ready. It may be tomorrow; it may be a year from tomorrow. *Quien sabe?* It will be when El Coyote thinks best, but that night we strike, and the next morning either Morales is lord of all this land, or we will have won peace and freedom for us and for our people."

Gathering volume in the darkness the clear voice made its last appeal. "What is life worth, in a land where we exist by permission only, where our homes are burned and our women taken from us? For me, *compañeros*, it is not worth this cigarette that I throw away. But I see a different life. I see this valley dotted

with farms. I see it as a land of men who hold up their heads as free men should. We can have that at a price, *amigos*. It is the price of armed resistance. For some it may be the price of death. Which among you will not pay it?"

Silence followed. Then from across the patio a voice in the darkness asked, "The Americano cavalry, must we fight them?"

"Once the Americanos learn a united people are behind El Coyote, they will withdraw, for they have no quarrel with the people of Mexico. And now, look you. One is come among us that you know. He has come to learn if you are worth fighting for. He comes to learn if you are ready. *Amigos*," the voice rang out, "what answer do you give now to El Coyote?"

Absolute hush fell. From out of the darkness sounded the clink of a horse's hoofs on the flagstones. Slowly a powerful white horse emerged from among the shadows, and a rider, masked and muffled in a heavy cloak, rode into the patio. Twice he circled amid the deathlike silence, then raised a gloved hand high in silent greeting.

The spell of silence snapped. Like a single voice rose the great deep chorus of men's voices, shouting wild welcome to this leader of the border band. The night thundered with the sound, the little cantina trembled, and far out over the desert rolled the cheers of these men of the Mexican border, pledging life and loyalty to the unknown leader. For long minutes the shouts echoed and redoubled, filling the patio, rising, it seemed, to the very stars; then silently the masked man

turned his horse and like some incorporeal shadow faded back into the velvet night.

Slowly the multitude grew silent and turned once more expectant faces to the speaker.

His voice held an exultant ring. "Men of the border, you have answered. Go back now to your ranches and haciendas, be of good courage, and wait for the word. No man can make slaves of a free people. Go back to your homes and be very sure that each day brings nearer the time when the clouds of Morales's power will be forever scattered."

He raised his arm in farewell and rode out into the desert.

Dawn was touching the mesa with silver when a solitary horseman dismounted and hurried inside the hacienda of Paco Morales.

At his desk the old Spaniard raised his eyes. "What news, Jito," he asked.

"They held a meeting. Two of my men were there. They are making ready to attack."

"Attack? Those insolent dogs."

"Si. They say they are tired of defending. Soon they will strike. But my greatest news is this—El Coyote himself was there."

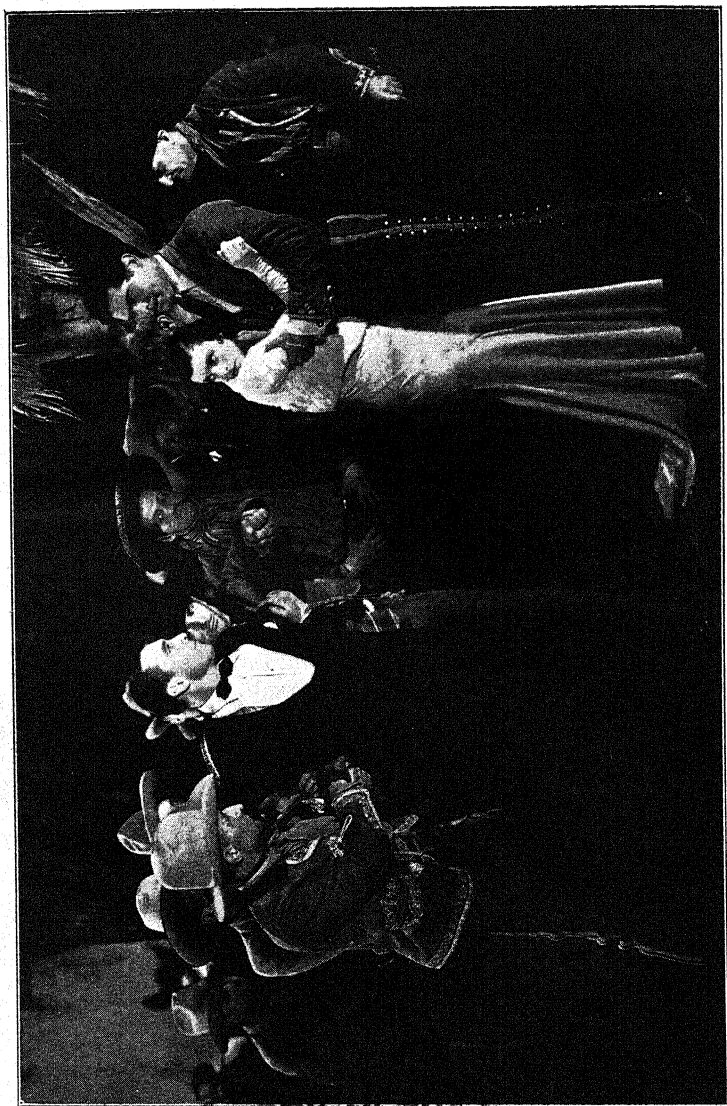
"Caramba! What did he look like? Was he recognized?"

Jito hesitated. "No. He rode his great white horse. He spoke no word, they say, and yet"—again he hesitated—"it may be we shall still find out, my uncle."

"You have an idea?"

"A thought only, not worth the speaking. But be sure of this, my uncle, we must end El Coyote's life or your power over the land is lost forever."

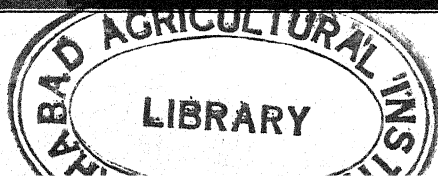
Morales nodded. "Life is a matter of stern necessities." He shrugged his shoulders. "After all, there are so many lives in the world."

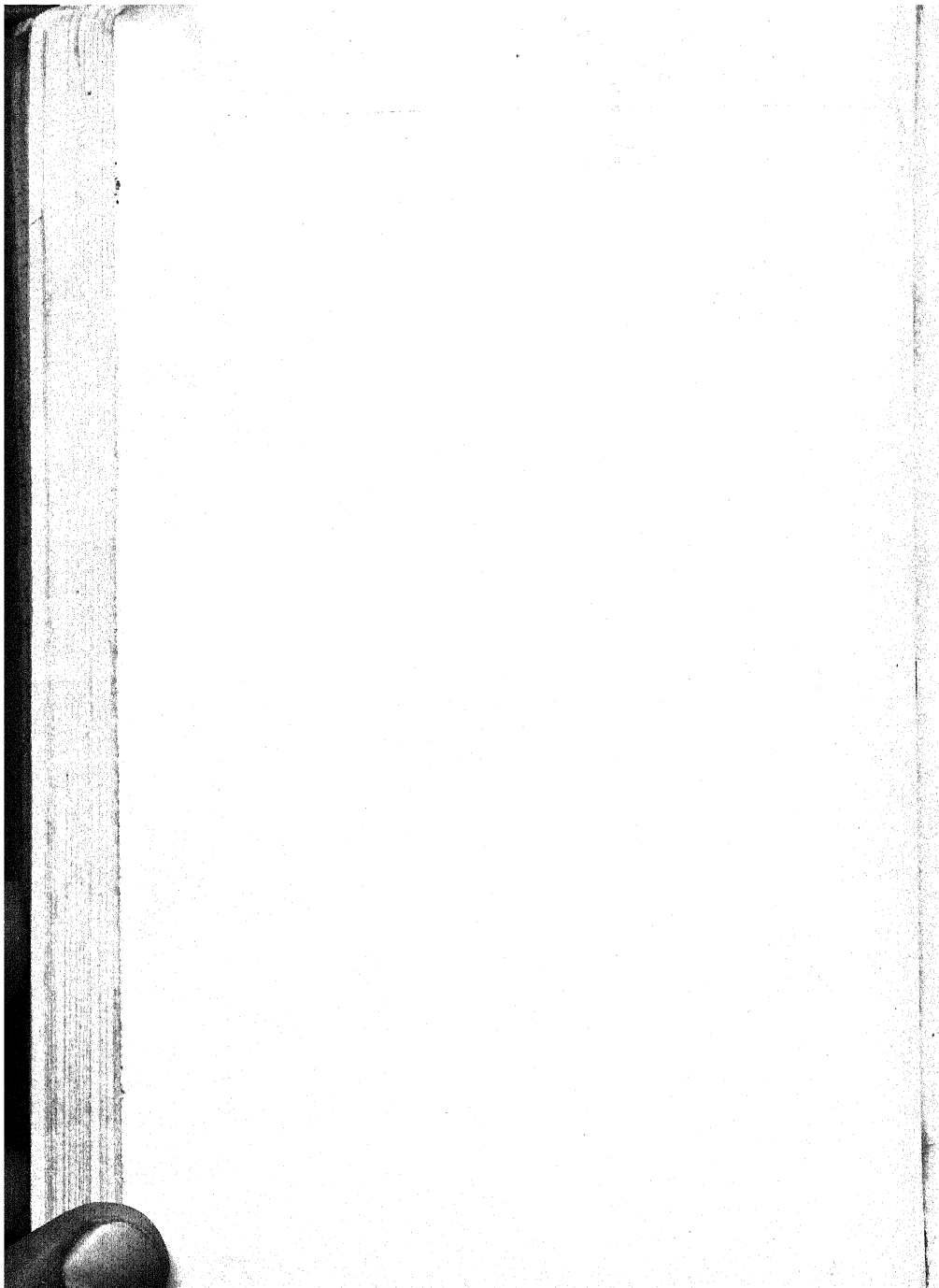


A Fox Production.

JITO DISCOVERS THAT THE GAY CABALLERO IS A DANGEROUS HOMBRE.

The Gay Bandit of the Border, Movie title, The Gay Caballero.





CHAPTER IX

TED and Bob were leaving for the great fiesta of Paco Morales—the Fiesta of the Rains.

From the foothills to the north horizon all the desert world had burst into bloom that April day. A soft haze touched the Mexican hills with the promise of returning spring, while slowly the two men jolted over the rutted road.

At the end of an hour Bob pointed. "Beyond that edge of the mesa is the hacienda of our all-powerful Don Paco Morales," he said.

Radcliffe threw away his cigarette. "And at the rate we're crawling it will be Sunday a week before we get there."

"Try to beat twenty miles an hour over this Mexican cow trail and see how many springs you have left. Besides, why all this gesture of impetuous youth? You're being blessed with my company and the world's sunshine. Why so eager for the journey's end? Any special reason?"

Ted laughed. "You're worse than the major's wife with your genial way of inferring possibilities. Should I blush becomingly and say 'Don Bob, I have a confession. I'm longing to see the lady Adela'?"

"Maybe. And maybe your smoke screen is fooling me completely. It's a question."

Ted's face grew thoughtful. "Well, part of the truth is I'm eager to see Morales again. It may be interesting to be the guest of the man who ruined my father and changed my life as profoundly as he did."

"Morales will give no sign of all that."

"Suppose I make him?"

"How?"

"By talking about it. What would you say if I ask his advice?"

Bob looked searchingly at Radcliffe, then nodded. "Worth trying. But remember, you're dealing with one of the keenest brains of Mexico. Life is a game of chess to Morales. I think he could easily beat both of us at intrigue. But talk to him. You may gain something, perhaps."

"And in my present condition it's hard to see how I could lose anything in the world today—except," Radcliffe added in a lower voice, "your friendship. I could never afford to lose that. I haven't forgotten how much that's meant to me."

Don Bob looked at the tanned face and the clear steady eyes. "What a precious thing youth is," he said at last. "Youth and courage." After a moment he added, "That's my manner of saying that I'm proud of the way you've taken it all."

"There was no other way."

"Oh yes. You might have been bitter. You might have played the martyr. Or you might have sworn revenge."

"And what makes you think I haven't plans for revenge?"

"Have you?"

The little car bumped along for a time before the boy answered. "When I listened to Price I felt I'd like to break the power of that octopus—to send him

out penniless and divide his million acres among the peons. I'd like to grind his chief bully's face into this sand. Just now it would give me a lot of satisfaction to do those things. Is that revenge, Don Bob?"

"Well, it's a distinctly unfriendly feeling toward one's host. Also, it sounds a bit like El Coyote's ambition. But look ahead of you."

There, just before them, where the road turned at the edge of the mesa, loomed a tall granite cross. It cast its long shadow across the road, standing out dark and austere against the blue vault of the sky. The only sign of man's handiwork out there on the rim of the desert.

For a time Bob's eyes were fixed in meditation. "The Cross of the Conquerors," he murmured at last. "It is the symbol of man's life, that cross. Hundreds of years ago it was erected by those fighting Spaniards who made a nation of this country. No one knows what it commemorates. There was an inscription once, but winds and sand have obliterated it."

"What is that long slab at the base?"

"It covers an empty vault—empty except for shifting sands. That, too, is part of its mystery. In the days when the peons were owned as slaves a legend grew up that this vault was to be the resting place of some awaited liberator of the people. Well, they were liberated, so far as laws go, but their lot hasn't greatly changed—and the vault still remains empty."

Bob drove on a few feet to the very edge of the mesa. He pointed down. "Coming to more agreeable things, there's the hacienda of Señor Morales."

Bob had stopped the car where the mesa sloped abruptly down toward the valley. Ted's lips parted in an exclamation of pleasure and surprise. It was as if in all that world of sterile sand and cactus, one had suddenly unrolled a toyland where green trees waved and the homes of men clustered about a wide, slow-flowing river. From somewhere out of the Mexican foothills a stream, twisting and twining upon itself, had at last broadened into this wide valley. On its farther bank lay little dots of red-tiled roofs and yellow adobe walls. There must have been a dozen low buildings sprawled about in Spanish design. White-barked eucalyptus trees and feathery tamarisk cast long, cool lines of shadow across the ground and splashed the walks leading to the main building. Circling the buildings lay a wide carpet of lawn, looking strangely cool and alluring in that world of dazzling sand, and about it all a high, forbidding wall.

Upstream a tiny village straggled along the water's edge. Beyond, nothing but desert, with its ascending heat waves shimmering in the sun to where, far beyond, the purple hills rose, mysteriously remote and unfathomed. Somewhere out there, Ted was thinking, El Coyote had his being. Somewhere out there, laying his plans, gathering his men, and in the night swooping down upon the valley. And here, before him, lay the stronghold of the enemy. In the distance a dog barked faintly. A horseman trotted down to the river bank nearest the ranch-house.

"Siesta time," murmured Don Bob. "Otherwise we would see more activity. Men come for miles to this

yearly feast of Morales. There will be music and dancing, probably much drinking, horse racing, and all the feudal remnants of a dead age."

"You don't seem greatly in sympathy with it."

"I love color and melodrama and romance. You'll see it all here. But it saddens me a little too. For sooner or later—perhaps sooner than we know—this well-ordered yesterday world of theirs will be as dead as the days of the old Spanish conquerors. Out here Morales has planned that everything conspire to take you back to those days. The careful courtesy, the great leisure, the very way he lives and thinks. And it is very beautiful and colorful and—quite impossible."

Leaning forward Don Bob threw the car into gear. "Now for some skilful herding of this eight-cylinder stallion, lest worse things befall."

Slowly they bumped along the narrow road over the mesa's edge.



CHAPTER X

THIS house is yours, señores, burn it if you will." Morales's white sombrero touched the ground. The Americans bowed in response to the old Spanish phrase of welcome. In wondering surprise Ted looked about him. It was, as Bob had said, a place of surpassing loveliness—a few acres of paradise in the heart of the great desert.

Before them towered a black iron gate, and beyond it the shadows of tall trees touched the yellow walls and the red tiled roof of the old hacienda. It rambled, with low eaves and jutting wings that may have been added as successive generations of its masters grew in wealth and importance. Beyond were a dozen smaller buildings, each one a model of the same artistry, all grouped under the high protecting wall that seemed to fix so firm a line between this shaded fragrant spot and the blazing desert outside.

Morales watched Ted's eyes. "You like it, no?"

"It's beautiful. You've created a fairyland."

Again the Spaniard bowed. "You are most kind. You may forgive, then, our shortcomings, if out here we lack some of the comforts that to you of the East have become necessities?"

Ted looked up at the vine-covered walls and the immaculate gardens. "It seems like some painting from an old story. I feel as if I had stepped back a couple of centuries."

Morales smiled in delight. "You feel that? I am

glad. It is what I should most like—to preserve a world out here as our grandfathers knew it. I try to keep the present at bay. The present—it is so uninteresting, so unlovely, no? You see, even for my servants I insist on the old costume of the country.” His hand indicated the peon girl who passed them in a blouse of gay colors, strings of spangles about her neck and ankles. “I also,” he said with a meaning smile, “retain another old custom”—and he nodded to a small one-room building with barred windows and heavily grated door. “My private prison,” he added. “But come in. A glass of Spanish wine will take the taste of alkali from your throats.”

Up the long, flower-bordered path he led them, through an oak-hewn door, and into the fragrant obscurity of the house. Beyond the tiled floor extended a broad patio, and in its center the waters of a fountain fell, cool and silvery. Palms and rare plants were growing within this restful place, where there seemed to be no sound but the soft falling of water and the lazy chirping of two brilliantly colored birds.

From behind a high wicker chair a thin column of cigarette smoke curled upward. Helplessly Morales shrugged.

“That is one modern motif I have not succeeded in banishing. She will smoke, no matter what I do. Your generation, Señor Radcliffe, is a very ruthless one.”

From behind the chair a languid voice reached them. “You would come in the siesta hour, both of you, and all morning I tried to look my prettiest. Now you burst in at the time when girls’ noses are shiniest and hair

mussiest. Come over here, Señor Radcliffe, and tell me why you've kept us waiting for long hours."

Radcliffe found himself looking into her smiling eyes. "That nose," he announced solemnly, "has never been shiny in all its impudent life."

She held out her hand and laughed. "Wonderful person, to think of a speech like that after miles of desert. Bob, where did your big gringo learn his serious and convincing way of telling the most outrageous lies?"

"It's probably a gift."

"Si, it would have to be. He is much too young ever to have learned it."

Morales was busying himself with a long, thin bottle.

"Of this I draw the cork myself," he explained over his shoulder. "One must combine love and care in opening old wines."

To the men he handed glasses of the straw-colored fluid.

"It is the sunlight of Spain, gentlemen. The warmth and sunny afternoons of some Spanish vineyard."

They raised their glasses toward Adela. Don Bob sipped appreciatively.

"That is worth many miles of desert road."

"Wine," responded Morales, "is it not one of the divine gifts? The Yaqui Indians who live here in our foothills have a legend that wine was given to the world by a goddess who happened to fall in love with their chieftain. It may be true. Why not? Perhaps goddesses become human when they love, just as mortal women become divine. That is why no man should fall in love. A man should only allow himself to be loved.

And yet, señores, are not life's richest sources of amusement the love of women and the domination of men?" The Spaniard poured out another glass of wine.

Abruptly Ted broke the long silence. "Señor Morales, you knew my father. When I came out here I thought he had died a rich man. Don Bob has told me my father was practically a pauper. I myself am penniless. You probably knew this already."

For a moment Morales hesitated. "Señor Radcliffe, it would be folly to pretend I did not know. I realize too what this must mean for you. It would be scant courtesy to ignore it. For my niece and for myself I can only say we are most sorry. Whatever I can do to help you, if anything can be done, I shall do gladly."

Radcliffe suppressed a start of surprise. Here was either sincerity, pure and simple, or deceit marvelously well acted. He looked toward Don Bob, who sat apparently unheeding, intent on the enjoyment of his wine.

"I'm glad of your directness," Ted answered. "I, too, will be direct. It has all come as a surprise, complete and very sudden. But it has occurred to me that you may know the cause of my father's disaster."

The Spaniard turned the glass in his long fingers. "Of course, you will understand, Señor Radcliffe, that your father's work and mine were quite distinct. It is true our interests often coincided, for a time, especially in enterprises that fitted in with what we both were doing. Thus, we both controlled the North Mexico Railroad in order to get its special shipping rates. I was interested in his irrigation scheme, and we operated for a time, one might say, as partners."

"That was years ago?"

"That was six years ago."

"And in the buying of the land for his great irrigation plan, did you do that together?"

"Si."

"You held controlling interest, Señor Morales?"

"I held a little over half—that was the agreement."

Ted lighted a cigarette. "What do you think was the cause of my father's failure?"

"It was simply that he had borrowed and expanded too much at the wrong time, señor. If it had not been for those disastrous days when money was impossible to get, and when every security was toppling, your father might have doubled his millions. But things went badly. Your father had been indiscreet."

"Did my father ask you for help before the end came?"

"He asked me to keep the Mexican government from canceling its concessions. I could not do that for him. I myself was fighting against failure."

"Señor Morales, if you will pardon a blunt question in your own house, did it help you in your own difficulties to have my father fail?"

Morales looked at Radcliffe. He may have been deciding on an answer, but the deeply lined face betrayed nothing. "As a matter of truth, it would not. Had it come earlier—perhaps, yes. But let me say this. It is something I hope you will believe. I would not have had your father fail for my own benefit. He was, in a sense, my friend."

Ted thought of Don Bob's words and was silent.

His steady gaze held the black eyes of Morales for a moment, and it may have been that the Spaniard's quivered for an instant.

"All this—it will profoundly change your future, Señor Radcliffe. Might one ask your plans?"

"I have no real plans as yet. Don Bob has offered that I work with him. I'm going to try it. If I find that I am only a charity burden, I'll go back East, and yet—" He looked out the broad window toward the blazing desert. "Everything here has made me want to stay. Perhaps for always. The East holds very little for me now."

"Let us hope you will stay always." Morales rose and looked at his watch. "In the half-hour will be our horse race. Until then I shall leave you with Adela while I ask Don Bob to come to my office."

As the footsteps of their going died away, the girl looked up from her deep chair. She reached out and took his hand.

"It is a very brave thing you are doing, Ted Radcliffe, to hold your head up beneath this sudden blow. But do you mind if I add one word—a word of caution?"

"Say anything in the world to me you want."

"Then I want to say this. Something in your manner tells me you believe uncle may have had something to do with your father's loss. Whether he did or not I can't say. I know nothing of his enterprises. But until you are sure, or until you can see some end to be served, be careful, my friend. I would not have conflict between you."

"Why?"

"Because," she answered simply, "I am fond of Don Bob and I like you. My uncle is very powerful and he holds to the Spanish ideas of a blow for a blow. You won't think me meddling for saying this, will you?"

"I think you're quite, quite perfect, and I'll talk no more today about what has passed. Out here, in this place of beauty and yesterday, it is hard to think that any other world exists, isn't it? At least a world where bonds and stocks and failures have any place."

"I often wonder if they have," she questioned slowly. "I was East for two years at school you know, and at times people would take me down into what you call the business section of those great cities of yours. I always felt I was stifled. I felt so sad. Always I wanted to take those pretty little girls who were sitting there bending over typewriters or great red-lined ledgers and say to each of them: 'Child, child, let all that alone. Leave it to old people who have nothing else to think of. For you the sun is shining and outside there is someone waiting to fall in love with you.'"

He stood watching her. Watching the changing colors of her long oval face, the shadows that came and went before her eyes, and the piled-up glory of her hair. And as he watched, Ted wondered if for her, too, life was waiting outside and somewhere a lover and the old eternal passion of love's madness.

"I have a theory," he answered gravely, "that all those girlish heads knew a great deal more about what was waiting for them outside than you suspected. And if you had been there at the closing hour, you would

He heard her laugh, saw her scramble from beneath the car, and in a few minutes joined her. Radcliffe looked dubiously at his hands, then seated himself on the running board and began rubbing sand between his fingers. "I thought you had collected all the grease."

Again the violet eyes looked up at him. "Am I terribly *sucia*—how do you say—grimy?" she asked.

For answer he took out his handkerchief and wiped a long streak on her cheek. "See that?" He showed her the blackened linen. "And there's lots more—two on your chin, and your nose is just one blob of gear grease."

"And Bob told me to look my best." The girl knelt down before him as a child might. "Please wipe off as much as you can. I'll get some cold cream in Verdi." Doubtfully he took her face in one huge hand, and with the other began laboriously scrubbing. The big, long-lashed eyes kept looking solemnly up at him. Her skin was so soft. The touch of it brought a sense of quick delight. There was a perfume about her, an exotic something, and that faintest of accents in her voice made him ask, "Are you American?"

She gave again that pleasant lilting laugh. "I'm Irish and Spanish and some Mexican. That should make me a good American." She leaned back, resting on her hands, looking up at him. "And you are Ted Radcliffe friend of Don Bob, and you're coming out to stay with him. *Bueno*, we need many, many big, broad shouldered men out here."

ood time, but"—she looked accusingly at the car—
m having one battle with the steering rod."
Broken?"

No, bent—knocked against a high center in the
d. If I could just straighten that rod—" Again she
ked up at him. "Here, anyone your size should be
e to bend a crowbar. Come on under." And she
appeared beneath the car. Dropping to the ground,
man squirmed after her.

The sand was liberally strewn with bolts and nuts
d assorted screws.

"You'll have enough parts left over for a radio set,"
he smiled.

"No, I won't. I've been through all this before.
Look, can you straighten that thing?"

Turning on his back, Radcliffe raised both hands
and with little effort bent the long rod.

"Hold it there," she commanded, and reached for a
bolt. "You mustn't mind if I sprawl all over you." She
dropped the bolt into place and clamped on a nut. A
moment of breathless silence, then a long sigh. "Now
it's easy. Can you reach up—no, on the other side of
me—there. Just hold that bolt. And don't mind if I
nock sand in your eyes. There! That's it." She began
mmering industriously with her wrench, then caught
low rumble of his voice and stopped.

Señor, I cannot hear a word you're saying."

"That's probably because your knee's embedded in
ishbone," came the muffled words. "I was just
that if you'll let me I can put the rest of these
ents together myself."

have seen them dusting powder on their noses, and not wasting time on any theories. But I'd like—"

Ted stopped. A tall, powerful figure stood outlined against the patio entrance. A Mexican cowboy in all the gorgeous attire of fiesta. Silver conchas gleamed against the milk-white leather chaps. A silk shirt of deep blue and above that a blue handkerchief knotted. A tremendous man. He might have been twenty-five or a little more. Thick, coarse black hair lay about his temples. A long scar seared his forehead.

"Adela *mia*," he began in Spanish. Then, catching sight of Ted, he added quickly; "*Dispense*. Señorita, your uncle asks if you care to come and see the races. I tell him if you will not come I myself will carry you. For must you not be there to say, '*Esplendido*, Jito!' when I win?" His white teeth showed beneath the smile, and his black eyes searched her face. Rather obviously he was much in love with life and with himself, this great, powerful Mexican. Adela nodded up at him.

"All my life I spend admiring you, Jito. What will you do when I fall in love with someone else and go away?"

Confidently the man smiled down at her. "Why, that is so easy! I shall break him in two—so." And his great hands closed together in a twisting gesture.

The girl laughed outright. "Sweet and simple solution." She turned toward Radcliffe. "This wildcat of the desert is Jito, my uncle's ward, and, according to his own admissions, he is a very devil of a fellow. Jito, you have heard of Mr. Radcliffe, who comes all

the way from the Atlantic coast to show you you're not the only giant in the world."

The Mexican stretched forth a great hand, and, to his surprise, Ted found, as they stood face to face, that he had to look up into the other's eyes. Jito's own eyes traced the outline of the American's form.

"Si. I have heard of the Señor Radcliffe. Already my men tell me of you, and I remember once reading about you—how in three minutes, or four, maybe, you throw the best wrestler of the colleges. I, too, can wrestle." He laughed and nodded, filled with energy and delight in living. "Yes, you are a powerful man, Señor Radcliffe. It would be good to lock us both in a room to see who should come out, eh?" Again he laughed in high delight at the thought.

"It would be decidedly bad for the room—an altogether untidy idea," the girl answered. "So run along, big one, and tell my uncle we are coming to see some unknown peon beat you in the race."

"Not while I live, littlest," he answered, and, leaning down he snatched a rose from her waist. "I take this to win," he called back, and was gone.

Ted raised his eyes. "So that playful young hurricane is the famous Jito?"

"My uncle's right-hand man. Jito is a grown-up child and the world is his plaything. He has made himself my bodyguard ever since I can remember. When I was East at school, Jito went to college in California. He lasted less than two months. There was something about throwing a professor through the window, and Jito returned home. He is of this country and of this

life. He simply would not fit anywhere else. I'm very fond of him, only he will not think for himself. He worships my uncle. I believe without knowing it he worships my uncle's brain—for Jito, heaven help him, has none of his own. A tempestuous child. He'll probably hate you because you are an unknown male from the outside world, and because you are going riding with me tomorrow."

"For that ride I can bear the hatred of several Jitos."

"Very pretty." She rose. "But don't let him annoy you with his childishness, and soon he will come to be your fast friend."

Ted, as he followed her through the patio, felt that there might be a reasonable doubt on that score.

CHAPTER XI

THEY passed across the patio and through a low arch, beyond which a late afternoon sun blazed down the long white roadway to the gates. A yellow roadster stood there, and Adela motioned Ted to the seat beside her.

"And now, my big Americano," she smiled, "you are about to see something that only Mexico possesses—the Feast of the Rains. It is the one time in the year when these peons forget poverty, hunger, and pain and give thanks at the coming of the rains. See, is it not a glad world this afternoon?"

They swung down through the village street, festooned with long shadows of giant pepper trees standing out black against the slanting sun. The street itself was alive with movement and color. Everywhere men and women in gay reds and bright greens and glittering spangles. The air was filled with voices that chattered excitedly in Spanish and rose at times to laughter. Everywhere happiness and light-hearted gaiety. And everywhere, as the yellow roadster passed, men stood bareheaded and women curtsied to this niece of the master over all their destinies.

"To this fiesta," the girl was saying, "men and women come from all the borderland. Even a few of the Yaqui Indians come down from the hills. You will see their camp near the race course. They will be dressed with feathers and bright ribbons braided in their hair, and they will be selling beads and arrows to the peons. The horse race is always the great event

of the fiesta. Vaqueros throughout the border bring their best horses. They talk of it from one year to the next. Last year Jito lost. The Yaqui Indian chief beat him by half a length. All this week the men have been waiting and betting their last centavos. Jito is wild to win. He's riding a man-killing stallion that no one dares mount but he. Then tonight will be the dance. Uncle has brought men from Sonora to play, and the hacienda, for this one day in the year, is open to all. So tonight we will dance, you and I, and then tomorrow, if you like, we will ride."

Already they had left the little town behind. Ahead lay the deep curve of the river, along whose nearer bank crowded lines of horsemen were drawn. Ted looked up into the sunlit April sky.

"Riding and dancing, music and wine and laughter," he repeated. "All life in this enchanted valley seems paradise. Does never pain or ugliness or fear touch you here?"

A shadow crossed the quiet face of the girl. "Sometimes," she said. "Sometimes sorrow seeks us out, even here." Then she smiled and the shadow was gone. "But today is fiesta, when all life is an invitation to dance and love and be very happy, since we Spanish people know too well that only the minute as it passes can one be very certain of. Over there"—she pointed just ahead—"where you see Don Bob and uncle in the judges' stand, that is where the race begins and ends. Uncle is judge." She smiled again. "He is always judge. That is because with his decisions there can be no dispute."

"Hello, up there!" She waved her hand to them.

From above her uncle called, "Come up quickly. If you miss the start of this race of races, Jito will destroy you both. He means to win today, and if he does only the dear God himself will be happier than Jito."

Morales led Radcliffe to the edge of the judges' stand. "This race," he said, "it is not like your races of the East. It is what you call a rough-and-tumble thing. The start"—he pointed directly to the cleared space ahead—"is here. The course lies beyond that clump of aspen and then across the river and up to where you see that point of high rocks. Each rider must circle those rocks. It is three miles away. Then down they must come, straight across the river again to where we are. Six miles, a long steep hill, two crossings of the river and a straight dash for the finish. A killing course, señor, for horse and rider both. Today there will be five to start. Three, I think, we can disregard, but that bronze, almost naked fellow sitting on the pinto mare, watch him well. He is the winner of last year. They call him Anton, a pure-blooded Yaqui, and each summer he takes my herds back into the land of his countrymen, where we whites dare not go. But see Jito sitting on his black stallion. See him plunge on that great vicious brute of a horse. I think he would kill Jito only too much he fears him. That, my friend, is the way one should deal with both horses and women—a tight rein and utter fear."

The girl, standing near them, had overheard. Her lips curved in a little smile of amusement. "Only be sure, my uncle," she advised, "that you choose the right horse and the right woman."

Don Bob rolled a cigarette. "Too bad we missed the morning event. I hear Jito won the roping contest."

Morales nodded. "And would have won the bulldogging but he was too rash and eager. He is all body and fire, that *muchacho*, and not enough brain. Look. They are mad to be off. Let us begin."

Morales nodded to the starter. Five vicious, impatient horses were drawing gradually to the line. Slowly they drew abreast of the stand, prancing, plunging, held in by the iron hands of their riders. Then a shot and a shout from the crowd, and like arrows the five were away in a swirl of sand.

From the very first Jito led. The Indian thundered on his flank, riding easily, saving himself for the plunge. In a moment they had flashed into the yellow waters of the river, forcing their maddened horses with voices and rawhide. White foam swirled before them, and from both banks rose the frenzied cheering of their followers. Together they struggled through the water, and in another moment were fighting their way up the gravelly bank. Not ten feet separated the two leaders. Behind, hopelessly beaten, straggled the other three. The long, killing climb lay ahead. Already from where Ted and the girl stood those plunging horses looked like toy things, striving desperately upward, always the black stallion of Jito ahead, yet never for an instant drawing away from the Indian who rode so surely behind him.

At the turn of the rocks, Jito's horse slipped to his knees, forcing his heavy rider almost out of the saddle, and they all but fell. Shaking his head, the big stallion

lunged to his feet, but in that lost second the Indian had swept past, and the shrill yells of his followers redoubled. The crowd below was now a moving, crazy riot of sound. The end was in sight. At breakneck speed the two riders pounded down the long slope to where the river bank rose ten feet about the bend of the stream. Adela raised her hands to her lips.

"If they strike the water at that speed, they'll kill themselves," she whispered.

A few yards from the river the Yaqui reined in his pinto for the steep descent and, amid clatter of loose pebbles, slipped perilously to the water's edge. As horse and rider reached the stream a black form leaped by them, almost over them, and struck the water with a crash and a cloud of spray. A gasp and a shudder ran through the throng. Jito had taken the river at top speed! For an instant the water closed over his horse's head, then the great stallion snorted to the surface and plunged toward the far bank. Again Jito was leading.

Wild with delight the vaqueros cried his name, casting sombreros and quirts into the resounding air. Yet even now there was too scant a distance between the riders to tell who might win. The mouths of the maddened horses foamed white as, ears back and wild-eyed, they lashed through the muddy stream. Almost as one, the dripping stallion and the Yaqui mare lunged up the bank, and with a last wild burst made for the finish. Together the riders thundered onward, beating the wet forms of their horses, grinding their heels into the horses' sides. Together they flashed past the finish line.

A silence, sudden and absolute, followed. Expectantly all eyes turned toward the judges' stand. A world of eager faces strained up to hear his words.

Morales raised his hand. "Jito," he announced briefly.

The air was split with sound. Like madmen Morales's vaqueros whooped their joy and emptied their revolvers into the air. The Indians fell silent, cloaking whatever feelings they might possess beneath stolid, impassive faces.

Jito had reined in his horse before the judges' stand, his black eyes burning with the exultation of the race. His lips were still parted with the snarl of contest, and his great chest rose and fell. Jito, it was evident, was very happy. It was as if he said: "Look. I am Jito. I conquer in all things." And knotted in his wet scarf was the rose of Adela.

Silently Radcliffe watched him. The young Mexican seemed a very gallant figure there in the evening sunlight, his thick hair tossed, shirt open, sitting his horse as if a very part of the animal. And, catching Ted's glance, Don Bob whispered: "An untamed centaur of the desert. But see his eyes as they look up at Adela."

They were the eyes of a loyal dog, a lover's eyes, too, but in their glance was something of the wildness of an untamed and untamable thing.

Leaning over the railing Adela extended her hand, and Jito raised it to his lips. "*A los pies de tu.*" He murmured the old courtly Spanish phrase, and his voice was the voice of one speaking to some holy being. A little throb of pain caught Radcliffe as he watched.

Children of the desert, those two, sharing a world where he yet walked an alien. Then he smiled and, reaching down, grasped Jito's hand.

"Well done," he said. "You are a true brother of the North Wind."

Jito's delighted smile grew broader. "A thousand thanks to the big Americano."

He felt the strength of Radcliffe's grasp and nodded in approval as he sat his horse carelessly, while about him clustered his vaqueros. Slowly Jito's own huge fingers tightened and Radcliffe tried to straighten, but the Mexican's hand held his own now with a steel clasp. Again Jito's eyes were gleaming.

"Men say," he smiled lazily up, "that the big Americano is a great wrestler, that he has a hug like the mountain grizzly. It would be good sometime to see which of us should first taste the desert's dust in such a contest."

Ted felt the girl's eyes upon him. He forced his lips to smile. "Whenever you like, Jito *mio*," he replied easily.

"*Bueno*. Let it be now, then. Let us see if there is one on the border stronger than Jito."

Morales interposed with a frown.

"Silence. This gentleman is our guest." He turned to Ted. "Jito has the manners of a goat. Success to him is like strong drink. You will forgive him?"

Again Jito smiled. "But surely so strong a man must be glad to test his strength."

Ted was neither looking at Morales nor listening to the other's words. That iron grip from below was

pulling him still lower over the rail. Some answering spark kindled within him. It was as if two naked souls had recognized beyond all uncertainty the presence of an enemy. Suddenly hot blood surged to his head as he stood there looking down at the Mexican's challenging eyes. Placing his free hand on the rail, he vaulted quickly over and stood beside Jito's horse. Then, without effort, he reached up, wound his arm about the Mexican's waist and pulled him slowly from the saddle.

They stood face to face now, in the center of that crowded, hushed circle, directly beneath the little group in the stand. Alert, poised, holding each other's eyes, still smiling warily. As the Mexican stepped back, Ted threw his coat aside.

"Ready?" he asked.

Jito raised his black eyes. "Si, always ready."

They swung together with a thud of straining flesh, bent heads pressed down against each other's shoulder, sinewy arms moving slowly up and down, seeking some point of weakness. Like great statues they bulked against the sunset, tense, waiting, almost motionless.

Without warning Jito lunged, throwing the weight of his body against Radcliffe, and, circling his waist with both arms, lifted his adversary bodily into the air. Ted's own arms locked about the Mexican's neck, and his muscles grew into steel bands as he forced all his strength into that punishing, killing neck-hold. The cords on Jito's throat stood out, his breath whistled. Mercilessly the hold tightened as Ted slipped his right hand forward, locking his arms together.

Like a cat Jito jerked backward, turning as he fell, striving to end that killing hold, hoping to drive Ted's body into the earth beneath him. As they swayed backward Radcliffe, releasing the Mexican, leaped aside, then, darting in, caught Jito, already off balance, and with a quick thrust and a jerk, threw him sprawling on his back. A clean fall. From Morales's herdsman came a hiss of dismayed surprise as they saw their chieftain in the dust.

Ted stepped forward and, grasping Jito's hand, raised him to his feet.

For a moment the young Mexican looked uncertainly at his antagonist. Then he laughed and felt tenderly his twisted neck. "By the cross, you are a strong man, señor. No one else in all Mexico could do that. And yet even that—it was a trick, it was not strength." His dark eyes again appraised him. "Yes, sometime it would be interesting to lock us both in the same room and see which of us would unlock the door. That would be worth while, eh, *amigo mio*?"

Radcliffe turned away. "It might have possibilities, Jito. Sometime when we're not too busy. But not tonight."

Like truant schoolboys, both men watched Adela and Don Bob approach. Something sparkled in the girl's eyes that might have been anger or amusement. Don Bob was trying not to smile.

"I am sure my uncle's peons thank you for a pleasant afternoon," came the quiet voice of Adela. "Are there any other little games you and Jito would like to play before we go?"

Jito looked once into the girl's eyes, then turned like a beaten dog.

Bob's smile broadened. Ted gazed down at his rumpled, desert-stained clothes, and suddenly it came over him that he had played the part of a fool before this calm-eyed girl. His face flushed and he looked for his fellow culprit, but Jito had disappeared. Ruefully Ted picked up his coat.

"I'm sorry. I'm whatever kind of imbecile you want to call me, but please don't slay me outright."

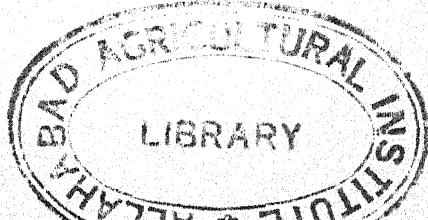
In silence they walked toward the roadster and once, looking quickly up, Ted surprised the faintest smile on the girl's face.

"Thank God for that," he said. "I've been afraid you were thinking of cutting me to five dances to-night."

She shook her head. "I shouldn't dare. Instead I'll probably have to dance all evening with you rather than trust you for a minute out of my sight. You might be overcome with desire to pitch quoits with the stable boy or—"

"Or challenge the tenor drummer to six fast rounds," suggested Ted. Then he added: "Really, I'm sorry. It all came so suddenly. He was so confident and so sure. And the next minute we were at it, and now I'm all sackcloth and ashes."

But just as they reached the car she stopped and looked earnestly up at him. "Don't take too seriously what I'm going to say. And yet I don't like it. When you and Jito stood there face to face I had a feeling almost of dread. For it came over me that you two



were destined enemies. That the two of you could never share this border country until one had conquered. And I want it so to be otherwise. Help me make it otherwise. Promise me you will avoid any quarrel, no matter how difficult that will be."

Ted started. He remembered his own instinctive sense of deep, inevitable antagonism against the man. But he only said, "Nonsense. Jito and I are going to be the best little playmates on earth."

"My friend, I know Jito better than anyone in the world. Better than he knows himself. Promise?"

"I promise. I'd promise anything."

The smile and upward look were his reward.

CHAPTER XII

I WONDER if she was really angry." Ted stopped as he dressed for dinner.

Bob looked out the great window of the guest room, where at that moment the glory of the setting sun was kindling all the western sky.

"Not so much angry as—afraid. No. That's not the word, either, for Adela Morales isn't afraid of anything on earth. Apprehensive, perhaps. I think she sensed danger to you in Jito's anger."

"But he wasn't angry."

"Neither you nor I can say what was in Jito's mind. Not a very wise act, you know, to risk making an enemy of him, and I think Adela was troubled with that same thought. You see, Jito happens to be jealous of you."

"Of me? Don't be an ass."

"My boy, Jito would be jealous of Saint Anthony if Adela smiled at him in just the same fashion that she once or twice has smiled on you."

Then Don Bob laughed a little envious laugh at the quick flush on Ted's cheek and lighted still another of his cigarettes.

"But what do you make of Morales and his tale?"

"About father? I think he lied."

"I, too. But I'm wondering why he should be so painstakingly civil to you unless perhaps because of Adela."

"Isn't it because Morales finds it less burdensome to

be friendly than otherwise? He strikes me as one of those who would rather forget all the unpleasant things of life, even the suffering he himself causes."

"Perhaps. Always provided he can get what he wants without causing suffering. But it's the end that counts with Paco Morales. He is one of the world's realists. That's why I wish you hadn't rolled Jito in the road. It hurt him in the eyes of his men. It hurt the prestige of Morales."

"Bob, you don't for a single moment mean that these people are dangerous, do you? It seems so unbelievable that this suave, courtly old fellow could ever think in terms of murder. You don't mean that, do you?"

"I mean, Ted, you're in Mexico. You are in the borderland, where Morales is the law. There are too many signs of bad omen. For one thing, I think you're growing fond of Adela, and that won't be particularly appetizing to either Jito or Morales."

"Not even when they realize that a penniless man could hardly be insane enough to fall in love with one of the richest girls in Mexico?"

"That might make them feel better, but it wouldn't make a bit of difference to Adela."

"God bless her for that. And for your own peace of mind, I'll ask no one to share my home and fortune until I first acquire a home and fortune."

"Morales and Jito will both commend your resolution, old son. In the meantime, dash into those clothes. It's half-past cocktail hour, and that is one of the sacred institutions here."

But it was Ted who finished first. Running down the

heavily carpeted stairs he came upon Adela standing by the tall western window, beyond which the last yellow streaks of sunlight were turning to purple and violet. He stopped, held breathless for a moment by the picture. For Adela, perhaps to please her uncle, had come down to dinner dressed in the fashion of the women of Spain. The gown itself was of shimmering black. Her hair, that shattered the fading sunlight into a thousand flames, was surmounted by a great amber comb, edged in jade. From her shoulders fell in soft folds a fringed Spanish shawl, pure white—a lustrous silky white—and embroidered on it a single red rose, about which clusters of silken leaves matched the jade of the comb. She stood there, tall and slender, looking out over the darkening desert, dimming, it seemed to him, even the sunlight with her loveliness. Once his lips parted to speak, but closed again.

She smiled up at him. "What were you thinking?"

He answered slowly. "I was thinking you're the most beautiful thing in the world."

Her eyes made him feel suddenly awkward and impatient at his own clumsiness.

"You learn Spanish ways very quickly, Ted Radcliffe."

He shook his head. "No, that wasn't Spanish. It's simply what I was thinking—on my honor. If I offended, I'm sorry, but I meant it quite sincerely. I meant just that—that to me, standing there as you are now—I have never seen anyone so beautiful."

She laughed into his eyes. "And by way of apology you repeat it four times. No, I am not offended. Per-

haps I'm pleased. Every girl is—whether she believes it or not. Only it sounds so terribly easy to say that sort of thing, and I don't like you to be too ready at saying nice things, even to me." She looked toward the stairs. "What do you think, Don Bob?"

He came slowly toward them. "Just now I think you're a very beautiful little lady," he announced gravely.

"That's downright plagiarism," objected Radcliffe. "I said it first."

A moment later Morales and Jito came from out the patio and Ted watched them with new interest. A striking pair, those two. The Spaniard poised and immaculate in his evening clothes, the Mexican almost grotesque, so huge he bulked beneath the stiff shirt and the black broadcloth. He seemed out of place in all that present-day clothing. He should have been some satyr, with great hairy legs, sprawling on a river bank.

Unhesitatingly Jito extended his hand. "*Qué va?* You are a strong man, my friend. My neck still aches." He laughed and moved that great columnlike neck back and forth. "Once while I was at school in California there came a Yale wrestler, Avery his name was, a big farm lad. One night we wrestled for an hour. We pulled and twisted one another about. *Dios!* My neck hurt that night too, but at last I won. Yes, you are stronger than Avery."

"Is Señor Radcliffe stronger than you, Jito?" asked Morales, smiling.

Jito shrugged. "It is as I said before. With this game of wrestling there are rules and forbiddings and clever

tricks. He might beat me again, for I am not clever. Yet I think in the serious work of killing a man with my hands I would win. What you say, Mr. Radcliffe?"

Ted raised amused eyes to the Mexican. "What can I say? I have never killed a man with my hands."

"No? I have. It is not pretty, and yet there is joy in it."

Adela moved toward the door. "You may give us all the gory details at dinner, Jito."

Outside, beyond the patio, an orchestra was playing, and in the room beyond soft-footed servants bore them food and wine.

Jito had lapsed into silence, and Ted, after listening for a time to the soft complaining of the Spanish music, said to the girl beside him: "What a land of dreams and beautiful days and perfumed nights yours is. A land where it would be difficult not to be fair and brave and happy."

She made no answer. He looked across at the dark, thoughtful face of the Spaniard, and wondered what lay behind that courteous, unfathomable mask.

"I had hoped to have news for you, Don Bob," the Spaniard was saying. "News that would for me make tonight a night of fiesta indeed, but"—his queer, unequal face saddened—"that news is delayed."

Don Bob looked up. "It was about the Coyote? You had hoped to tell me he was captured?"

The other nodded. "You read the brain, señor. But not exactly his capture. No, I had hoped to tell you of his death."

"Are they then that near to him?"

"Major Blount has called every man from the garrison for a ten-day campaign of the border. Next week two squadrons of Mexican cavalry go with him, and together they will search out every inch of the hills to the south. I myself am working still another way. I have sent out six of my boys to mingle with the peons and the smaller ranchers and learn what this rebel chief's plans are. Monday I send Jito and all the men to join Blount for a search. Those bloodhound boys of mine, they are more eager to close with the bandits than all the others. They have suffered too much. And Jito"—the old fellow looked affectionately at the big Mexican who bore him so strange a resemblance—"Jito is the most eager of all. He has—how you say?—dedicated himself to killing this Coyote, and I tell him that if he does I shall give him one hundred thousand pesos gold."

"Your pesos I do not greatly need," the young Mexican answered. "I will kill El Coyote for the joy of it. Instead I shall claim—what should I claim?" He smiled at the girl before him. "Should it be the love of our cousin Adela?"

Morales's stiff lips also smiled, but a little sadly. "If that were in my power to give, I should give it."

"But that will never be in your power to give away, will it, dear?" the girl asked. She patted his thin hand. "You must keep all the love I give you, ungracious one, not offer it to every hot-headed boy."

Ted broke the silence. "Why are you so bitter against this border thief? After all, there have been other bandits and cattle rustlers who have come and gone."

"Señor, if it were just a few head of cattle or horses he takes, or the few herdsmen of mine he has killed I should not greatly care. What are cows or peons? But El Coyote is no mere bandit. To me he represents the enemy. He carries with him disaster greater than the loss of those herds. He carries with him what might be the end of all that I and my fathers before me have built up—our right to rule here in the border. That is why.

"My fathers carved a domain out of a wilderness. They did it by sheer strength and by their will. It was their will to rule. That was their religion. It is my religion. This country is mine. Not so many years ago the peons about here were the slaves of my grandfather. They should still be slaves, and in all but name they are, for I am master, and this, as I see it, is right, and the will of God. And now comes this bandit dog and to the peon says: 'You are men. This land is yours. Yours is the right to own cattle and graze them, and yours is the right to marry and give your daughters in marriage, and if anyone comes between you and your liberty, kill him. See how little I fear this great master of yours. I kill his men, I burn his ranches, I take his best cattle. I cut his fences and I laugh.'

"And, señor, he does all these things so that my people whisper and grow discontented and take heart and believe perhaps that they too can do these things and rise up against me. Already I hear murmurings. Already my Jito has had to teach fear to them when they refused to pay us the rents and the shares that are our due. These times are times of unrest in the

border country, and if a leader should find his way to the hearts of these people—”

The voice shook in a moment's passion. “—for me and for all that my people have built up, it might be the end. Rather than that I should see myself dead. And I shall spend my lifetime hunting down this dog—this son of a dog.”

Morales had risen, and his face was jerking in anger. Quickly Adela came to his side, and her hand stroked his cheek.

“Be not aroused, my uncle,” she whispered in quick Spanish. “You must not do this. Please, for me.” And she petted and scolded him back to calmness, yet his hand still shook a little as he drained another glass of the straw-colored wine.

“You must forgive,” he said at last. “It is the only subject in which I let myself become a foolish old man. That is my folly. But to answer your question in a word, I hate this Coyote because he breaks my power. He damages my scheme of things.” Resolutely he shook off the moment's weakness and was again able to smile, but the look of anxiety still remained in Jito's and Adela's eyes.

All zest had gone from the little group. The dinner was finished almost in silence, and later Adela spoke to Ted of her uncle's outburst against the bandit.

“My uncle's passion in life,” she told him as they stood outside the patio, “is to continue this realm he has built up. It is for that he wants me to marry and have children. It was his tragedy that he himself had no children except—you will learn this sooner or later,

for it is border gossip—except Jito, whose mother I never knew. Jito has come nearest to taking the place of a son, yet he cannot inherit. I wish he could. And now El Coyote threatens to arouse the people and topple over my uncle's kingdom. So for that he has hated the bandit with such hate as I am afraid to think of. He broods. It is unhealthy. I have watched him fail during the past years since this bandit came."

"But isn't all this thing that your uncle stands for destined to fall sometime?"

For a while the girl made no answer, looking out into the night. At last she turned and nodded quickly. "It is true," she said. "It seems almost treason for me to say it, but it cannot be otherwise. Only it will be the end of my uncle and all that he represents. And for me it would mean—*quien sabe?* What would you say I am fit for, Ted Radcliffe, in that busy world that you come from and that some day is going to engulf us here? I often wonder what I should be good for. I should be ever so much worse off than you when you found yourself cast adrift without warning. You have been brave not to let it make any difference to you."

"I shouldn't say it hasn't made any difference. So far as my future goes it may have made a great deal. For one thing, I am very nearly penniless. That's bound to create an important difference, whether I go back East or stay here. It shouldn't but it's bound to. Today Bob was joking with me about the need to marry a rich girl. At the present moment I haven't even the right to fall in love, and in the old days, when

I was one of the world's eligible young men, I didn't avail myself of the opportunity."

Adela was watching him with a little frown. "You really mean that if you fell in love you wouldn't feel you had the right? That just because you lacked a few miserable dollars you would kill that love?"

"I'd go away, I suppose."

"In that case," she replied in her calm, judicial way, "I should say you were what Jito calls 'one very damn fool.' What has love to do with anything but love?"

"I once thought that. Once, when I never had to think about the importance of three meals a day. But it wouldn't be a very heroic act, would it, for a man to ask a woman to starve with him, even for love's sake? Love, if it means anything, must mean protection and care."

Again she smiled. "I think you'll forget all those fine-spun theories when you really love, Ted Radcliffe."

"You're an expert, then, on that subject?"

"Oh, we Spanish are born with a knowledge about love. I have been in love so many times."

"Really?"

"Of course." Her eyes, like stars in the half-light, challenged him. The fragrance of her seemed very near, and for a moment all life seemed to wait breathless with expectancy. He took a half-step forward, watching the white arm that rose to her neck, and paused there. His own hand covered hers. He bent forward and his lips touched her trembling hand. For a fleeting instant he felt the touch of swift, light fingers in his hair. Abruptly she swerved away.

Silence for a time. At last he asked in a voice not yet grown steady: "What would you think if a penniless man like myself should tell you that he loved you?"

Adela turned with a half-sigh from the window. "I should think it very exciting," she whispered.



CHAPTER XIII

THAT night for Radcliffe was like a page torn from romance. The garden, illuminated with a myriad tiny lanterns, had been thrown open, and since dusk the villagers streamed in and out, dancing on the flagstones to the music, laughing among the shadows, feasting and drinking, a constant flow of color and eager gaiety. It was their day of happiness, of rest from toil and from life's implacable demands, and they gave themselves whole-heartedly to the moment with its song and laughter.

A few Yaqui Indians, tall and unbending, stood in their blankets, watching the women dancing to the soft music, while their own long-haired stolid squaws squatted at their feet, silently accepting the cakes that Morales's servants offered them.

"Straight, clean-limbed, untamed fellows, these Yaqui," Don Bob was saying. "These at least our host has never brought under his thumb. Morales's reign ends with the foothills and his domination goes no farther than the docile, lowland people. There is something in the mountains that breeds freedom and impatience with servitude. The slaves of the world have always come from the lowlands."

But Ted wasn't listening. Instead he was watching Adela, who, in her rôle of hostess to these strangely assorted guests, moved quietly among them, giving the children little presents, giving gracious words to all. And always, as if she were something more than mor-

tal, the hats of all the peons swept in the dust before her, and the women as she passed reached out and reverently touched the fringe of her Spanish shawl. They followed her with their eyes, smiled when she smiled, each eager for a word or nod.

"How she is loved," Ted murmured.

Bob nodded. "With good reason. She loves them. If El Coyote only knew it, Adela Morales is his greatest enemy. Without the love these people bear her, the power of our friend Morales might last no longer than this cigarette. It's almost a worship they have for her—stronger even than their fear of Jito. After all, they are like little children. They love her because she is beautiful and kind to them, and so they endure the slavery Morales puts upon them."

A quiet footstep sounded behind them, and Morales was offering them his cigarette case. "These, too, are from Spain," he told them.

"I was wondering just now," said Bob, as he held a match for his host, "if you realized the formidable enemy that Adela must be to El Coyote?"

"Enemy?"

"I mean the love these peons have for her. Might it not be this love of theirs that keeps them loyal and holds many from joining the Coyote's band?"

Morales barked a short laugh. "It is fear, not love, with these vermin, my friend. The one thing that helps keep them is that here their best interest lies. They were born to be slaves and to need masters who are stronger than they. You must forget such weak sentiment when dealing with these people, señor." Then, as

if suddenly remembering, he handed a piece of folded paper to Don Bob. "A rider just brought this," the Spaniard told him. "He waits outside."

With a little frown Bob tore open the paper, and as he read the frown deepened. He looked up and tapped the message with his finger.

"This may take me away for an hour or more—with your permission."

Morales bowed. "I had feared as much. Your rider brought a saddled horse." And as Bob hurried down the walk he turned again to Ted. "We were speaking of how to handle these people. You see those gates?" He led Radcliffe to where the tall iron gates hung open. "More than one man has been chained to them as a lesson in behavior."

"Have they no other use?" Radcliffe asked.

"No longer. I hope they never will. Once my forefathers found need of them in repelling attacks. Still, this hacienda would make a rather strong fortress with those gates closed."

Ted looked up curiously. "But they only hang on those hinges. A strong man could lift them off."

Incredulously the Spaniard raised his shoulders. "A strong man indeed—perhaps Jito or yourself might do that. Yet I remember—"

The words were lost in the maddened pounding of horses' hoofs. Beyond the gate a hatless rider had pulled his pony to a halt. Flinging himself from the saddle, he ran toward them, then catching sight of Adela, threw himself to his knees before her. His upturned face was dust-stained, and in the light of the

lanterns it gleamed with sweat and with a darker streak of blood. The man was speaking to her quickly, insistently, his face upturned in supplication. Once he raised his hand and grasped her shawl, and now the girl had put both hands before her eyes and swerved. The silenced crowd of peons was falling back, and through them Morales and Radcliffe pushed their way to the girl's side.

Adela turned an agonized face toward them. In supplication her arms reached out to her uncle.

"The vaqueros," she cried. "This man says that Jito's vaqueros are raiding the village, that they have broken into the cantina and are driving the people through the streets. He says they are wild with drink and he is afraid for the women. Make Jito send them away."

Slowly Morales turned toward the kneeling man. Deliberately he put his foot on the peon's shoulder and kicked him into the dust.

"Only that?" he asked contemptuously. "*Por Dios*, if I carried a whip I would cut you to ribbons. Is this some wayside inn that you should rush upon me and my guests with your whining? Get back to your whimpering people. Never once have my men ridden among you but you have come crying with fright to me." He put his arm about the girl's shoulder and made as if to turn away, but suddenly Adela's eyes blazed. Her slender figure stiffened.

"I will not have it. Mother of God, is there no end to the madness of those vaqueros of yours? This time, my uncle, we will make an end of it."

To Ted it seemed that suddenly into her voice had come some note final and resolute. She flung Morales's hand from her shoulder.

"I will not have these people made sport of by a drunken horde of cowboys. Do you understand me? I will not have it. I am going down to the village. No, you cannot stop me, my uncle."

Her car was standing at the end of the broad driveway, and, throwing off her shawl, she ran and flung open the door. Without a word the two men jumped to the running-board, and in another minute the little car was racing down the dusty, bumpy road. Already above the hum of the engine shouts came to them from the village, and now a volley of shots rattled far down the street.

The girl redoubled her speed.

"*Dios*," muttered Morales. "This thing they call impetuous youth may break all our necks before the night is done."

The street was filled with riding men, great swarthy fellows with red and purple shirts and chaps chosen especially for the fiesta. Picked men—Jito's vaqueros. They rode not only in the street but upon the narrow pavements, singing and shouting, laying about them with their rawhide quirts. One had driven his pony among the wares of a small fruit store and contentedly watched the horse munching apples and pears, while the helpless proprietor stood by, alternately murmuring curses upon the vaqueros and prayers to his saints. As the car swung around the corner, one of the cowboys, lurching a little in his saddle, began shooting at the lanterns with indifferent success. He swore loudly at

each unsuccessful shot. Farther on rose a roar of deep laughter, and the rattle of shattered glass.

As if on some secret mission the main body of Jito's vaqueros were pushing steadily on toward the farther end of the village, leaving behind them a trail of wreckage and destruction. Suddenly from beyond the village the sky blazed and a shower of sparks flew upward toward the stars. The vaqueros spurred forward, and with flashing eyes Adela looked at her uncle.

"They have fired Dominguez' ranchhouse," she cried, and sped out the hard-baked road. As the car topped a rise Ted saw a solitary dwelling outlined in the lurid glare of flames. But the ranchhouse itself was not burning. Two stacks of hay were ablaze, and as the car swung toward them the roar of flames grew louder. Already a crowd of half-drunken vaqueros rode madly about the solitary ranchhouse, while from the village streamed the rest of Jito's dreaded band, yelling and snapping their quirts, eager for whatever new entertainment the night might afford.

Straight into the crowd Adela drove the car. Horses and men leaped wildly aside as she threw on the brakes, almost in the center of the vaqueros. Ted leaned forward. Hemmed in by shouting horsemen, an old man stood, bound with leather thongs, and directly beside him a young vaquero held a girl in his arms. Helplessly she struggled there. Her blouse, caught in his fingers, had ripped, exposing her breasts. Laughing, the vaquero held her high up to the delight of his fellows.

"*Por Dios*," he called, "what a morsel, this little pigeon! I could eat her in one bite." And he pretended to close his teeth on her shoulder.

The girl's head had fallen back, her eyes were closed. The old man moaned feebly.

Ted gathered himself to jump, but Adela had already leaped from the car, and, snatching the quirt from the hands of a rider, lashed it full in the vaquero's face with all her might. Dropping the girl, the Mexican turned savagely, while a white scar stood out across his cheek. Once more the quirt bit deep into his skin. He raised his clenched fist, then, seeing Adela Morales, started back and snatched the sombrero from his head.

"Señorita," he began.

"You damned dog!" Once more she lashed the quirt into his dark face, then hurled it at his feet. "You drunken, cowardly cur! Out of here, you and all your black pack."

Before her white fury the dismayed crowd pushed back. Adela kneeled and gathered the girl in her arms. Ted still stood on the running-board, ready to strike if the need came. His hands were clenched, but the vaquero, like a beaten dog, crept into the crowd. The sobbing girl hid her face in Adela's arms.

From the outer fringe of the crowd came the sound of renewed shouting, and the galloping of horses. Triumphantlly the vaqueros raised their hats in greeting. Jito, their leader, had arrived. Who now would come between them and their just loot? Jumping from his horse the big Mexican shouldered his way to the little group. He had eyes for none but Adela, and at her he frowned.

"Why are you here? You ought not be here among these people."

He turned to Morales. "Señor, why do you let her come out on a night of fiesta?"

"Why do you dogs come among these people on fiesta?" the girl demanded, and Jito stepped back a pace before the hot anger of her eyes. The contemptuous voice went on. "Your damned wolf pack must have blood, always blood, from these peaceful people. Each year it is the same. Always the same tale of rape and terror and drunken raids along the border towns, and always a shrug of the shoulders. It is just Jito's boys at their pleasure." She raised her clenched fist. "I hope to the Mother of God some day El Coyote seeks you out and finds you at your play. Your cries will have a different tone. You will taste a different sport from tearing clothes from unconscious girls and striking down men already tottering with age. Is there no other way to show your bravery than here at peaceful ranches? Last month at Agua Dulce—yes, I heard about that too, and what you did at Tierra Brega, when your pack went blind mad because the people of the village had fenced in their farm land. You are a brave man, Jito, and a leader of brave men, and some day I hope to God I shall see you all fawning at the feet of El Coyote for that rotten life of yours."

She would have said more, but Morales placed his hand over her mouth.

"Not another word," he said. "I will not have it."

With the strength of anger she struck her uncle's hand aside. "Tell him you will not have his cruelty or cowardice. *Tell him!* Do you remember two years ago, when your vaqueros raided the village? That was sport

too, wasn't it? And do you remember the girl who never became quite sane after those ruffians of yours and Jito's had their way?"

A sob caught the girl. "Be very glad I have not my way tonight, or some of these merrymakers would die."

Jito raised his huge hands—tears of pent-up anger stood in his eyes. "If a man had spoken to me as you have, he would have died." His only answer was the girl's disdainful laugh.

Jito turned to Morales. "I come here tonight to deal out justice to one who defies your rights. This is no time for the interference of women."

Steadily Morales looked at Adela. "She will not interfere. I forbid it. But let your justice be brief."

Jito gave his vaqueros an order, and in the instant they brought the bent old man before him.

His faded blue overalls were tattered at the edges. The shoes upon his feet were cut and worn. He looked up fearfully at the towering vaquero.

"For the love of God, señor," his thin, high voice began, "what do you want of me? I have nothing here. I am poor."

Jito smiled thinly. "And you will be many times poorer before the night is finished." He rolled a cigarette. "Two months ago, Felipe Dominguez, I told you to leave this country. I told you we would not tolerate your presence here in the midst of our range."

"But I own these five acres. I have my papers." The voice trembled.

"Papers, you peon dog. What are papers to us? Are we clerks and schoolboys that you talk of papers?"

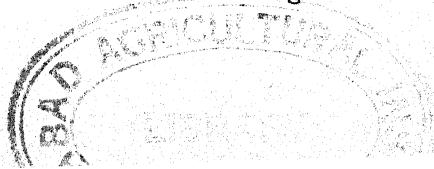
"But, señor," the voice had taken on a puzzled tone, "I own this land."

"Now, by the cross, you own nothing here except through the tolerance of Paco Morales. You all know that. He tolerates you. By his favor he lets you live, and when he chooses to raise a finger and say go, it is better that you go, or that you had never been born. You know all this is true, yet you thought—God alone knows what you thought. Perhaps you thought that El Coyote would protect you. Men tell me that this bandit has promised to protect all of you. Well, he makes poor success of it tonight, eh, *amigo*? But let that pass. You have been warned to go. One month ago I warned you again. You said nothing. You did nothing."

"I asked for time," the thin old voice replied. "I asked only to stay until after harvest. It would ruin me to leave my home before harvest."

"It will ruin you in any case, old one." Jito puffed slowly at his cigarette. The flames roared higher, gleaming on the vaqueros' bridles and polished conchas, casting long shadows out toward the black night about them. Beyond lay the village in absolute quiet. Morales had laid his long arms about Adela. Beside her Ted stood, grimly alert.

"For the last time has Paco Morales tolerated such swine as you on the range," the big Mexican went on. "Who is the law here in north Mexico? Morales. Who holds back the gringo on one side and the Yaqui on the other? It is Morales. Why should he allow you to settle here like ticks on a cow, here in the valley, and benefit from what his work has brought about?"



"But, señor, the land was bought."

"Now, by every saint in heaven, you come back to that, do you? The land was bought! In this country the governor of Sonora himself could not sell you security on the range of Morales. This land is ours. We who follow the cattle own it. It is free, open land for us. It is not land for farmers or for farms."

From within came the exultant laughter of a man, and a woman's scream, quickly muffled, then silence.

Jito pushed his huge form through the door, followed by Ted and Adela. On a table beyond burned a feeble, smoking lamp, and in the dim circle of light the same vaquero again held the peon girl. His bloodshot eyes glistened. His hand moved over the smooth skin of the girl's throat and he grinned drunkenly at Jito.

"Is she not a soft armful, *caballero*? *Por Dios*, she will make one forget the long ride of the night." And he pawed the shrinking girl.

Impatiently Jito shook his head. "Let her go."

In surprise the other looked up. He shook his head defiantly.

"Let her go." Jito's voice had sunk to a dangerous growl.

"*Qué va!* She is the best of the loot, this little dove."

Jito took one step forward. His hand closed about the man's neck and he raised him bodily from the ground.

"Once before I have had trouble with you," he said in low, even tones. "The next time my boys will cast lots for a dead man's saddle." He shook the choking vaquero, then dropped him contemptuously to the floor.

"No harm will come to you, señorita," Jito told the girl. "It is with your father we have business." He turned again to the old man. "Felipe Dominguez, because you did not see fit to take Morales's warning, this night your house is to be burned, your fields trampled by horsemen, and your cattle shot. And because you have defied my orders, these men will give you thirty lashes of rawhide. Tomorrow, when the desert country hears, they will begin to believe that it is not wise to stand out against the will of Paco Morales."

The girl ran to Adela and, falling before her, wound both arms about her knees.

"No, no, señorita. For the love of God, make them spare him. Do not hurt him. Do not burn this house. Let them give us but a little time, señorita, and we will go. He did not mean to defy Paco Morales, but we are poor, señorita, so very poor, and I have been ill."

Imploringly Adela turned to her uncle. The old Spaniard gave no sign, but as she looked her uncle's eyes rose, with a sudden catlike gleam, and following his gaze she saw Ted, with clenched fists, advancing toward Jito.

With a quick step she was at Radcliffe's side. "Don't." She laid her hand on his arm. "You will ruin everything."

"I'll ruin a few of these drunken vaqueros." His voice was thick with repressed anger.

Adela's grip tightened. "Don't you see that it is just what they want? This is not your affair, it is mine. I forbid you to interfere, whatever happens." She stamped her foot in sudden anger. "Why must you,

too, make it harder for me? I tell you I do not need your help. Go back. Oh, please go back!"

Reluctantly he turned and walked to the car.

Already the vaqueros were muttering at the delay, pressing closer about the little circle, cursing, shouting to Jito, eager for the end.

Jito nodded to his men. Laughing, they seized the old peon and bared his withered, wrinkled back. With rawhide they tied his arms to the doorway.

"A bad day for you, *compadre*, when you thought El Coyote could protect you," muttered a vaquero. "What is the protection of El Coyote worth now?" And viciously the man tightened the rawhide thongs.

Adela threw herself between the vaqueros and that aged, drooping form in the doorway. Her eyes, narrow with anger, threw back the light of the rising flames. Her words lashed them with their tone of cold contempt. "You talk of justice, you dogs, you cowering, fawning dogs, that come to fight against an old man and his daughter." Her fingers tore at the knotted thongs and again a wave of pent-up anger arose from the crowd. Jito looked impatiently about him. "I cannot hold them long," he said in a low tone to Morales. "They must have blood."

Once more Adela's voice rose above the tumult. "Jito, make them wait until tomorrow." But her words were lost among the jeering cries, while the maddened crowd pressed forward. A vaquero stood raging before Jito.

"Since when do we take orders from women, *hombre*? Send her away while there is time."

The tumult redoubled. The shouts had taken on a new ominous quality. It had become the low, deep roar of a wolf pack ready to close on its prey. Quickly Jito raised Adela and carried her to where Morales stood. "Even if I would, I cannot hold them now," he said. "In another minute I should be fighting for all our lives."

He raised his head. "*Bueno*," he called. "Thirty lashes to teach this peon wisdom."

Morales looked quietly on, his mouth set in a half-smile. His restraining arms had closed about the girl, and with a sob Adela closed her eyes.

A stalwart vaquero rolled back his sleeve and picked up a heavy quirt. He stood full in the flaring light of the haystack and raised his clenched hand for the blow.

That blow never fell.

From somewhere out of the darkness burst a flame and the vaquero whirled, clutched his breast, then fell headlong at his master's feet.

A clear voice called from the darkness. "Let no man move."

Clustered about the ranchhouse each vaquero stiffened. One dreaded word passed among them like the voice of death itself.

"El Coyote!"

The flames of the haystack rose higher, tossing great sparks into the blue desert sky. Dimly the vaqueros could distinguish a double rank of silent horsemen surrounding them, ready and ominous. The firelight danced on the steel of their rifles and glittered on the conchas of their chaps. Again came the clear voice.

"I am sending men in to disarm you. If one of you moves, it is death to all of you."

Five masked horsemen approached. Quickly they made a little pile of the weapons of Jito's men. A short, stocky rider seemed to have taken charge. Presently he ordered the vaqueros to stand before the door. Meanwhile other riders gathered the horses.

"So you thought the protection of El Coyote not enough, *amigos?*" asked the masked leader. "You will have other thoughts before dawn. But now I bring you this message from El Coyote. Listen carefully, as you value life, for the patience of El Coyote is not endless. For twenty years you, Paco Morales, and you, his hirelings, have held dominion over the borderland. You have driven men and their families from land that is theirs. You have done it without fear, for you knew that the peon endured much and did little. We had no leader, and for these reasons the herds of Morales have become fat and multiplied, while the people have lived in poverty and dread. Our women have not been safe, our children have had no future to look forward to, our old age has become filled with fear. And all this because Morales wanted a land that was ours by right. Today few of us now have enough land to make a grave, and still the herds of Morales grow." The masked rider stopped speaking.

The dying flames of the haystack cast spectral shadows across his face and caused the eyes behind the black mask to glisten. Still no man moved. Beside him Ted could hear Adela's quick breathing. Jito stood stiffly before him, not knowing whether to expect

capture or quick death while behind, in an outer circle, the outlaws sat in quiet watchfulness.

Once more the masked man raised his voice. "Vaqueros of Morales, a leader has risen. You call him El Coyote. Many times you have sought to kill him. Mexican cavalry has joined with the Americanos to run him down. But he is still free. Tonight he is out there with us. Why do you not go forth to him, Jito, you who have sworn to tear out his heart? See, he is out there—only a little way,"—and the masked man pointed to the darkness behind him. A shiver of fear ran through every man. Even Jito himself darted an uneasy glance toward the shadows. Out there, just beyond the rim of light, the unknown killer was. A trembling vaquero made a fleeting sign of the cross. "*Dios mio*," he murmured. "Tonight for this we all die."

"Listen now to what El Coyote bids me say. The ranchers of the border will no longer bear the yoke of Morales and his vaqueros. From now on we will strike back, and, even if El Coyote himself is taken, still will we strike back. And for every cow of ours you take or kill, we will kill two. For every man you give twenty lashes we will tie up one of your band and give him forty. We are men with our backs to the wall. We have nothing to lose, for life itself has long since lost the things that gave it value. Days of living profit us nothing, for we have neither peace nor security. But that day is done. From now on we fight for the things that make life good."

Stepping directly before Adela, the masked man's sombrero swept the ground. "Go in peace, señorita,"

he said. "The peon in his hut remembers Dona Adela in his prayers."

Turning again to the vaqueros he pointed toward the village. "El Coyote bids me tell you for this one time to go. Next time it will be a different tale. Your horses and guns stay here."

Jito shrugged his great shoulders. Deliberately he rolled a cigarette, then walked over to the old rancher, still bound to the door, and pulling out his knife severed the bonds. He turned.

"Tonight is yours, señor," he said indifferently. "Tomorrow is yet another day. And sometime when your coyote leader wishes to settle all disputes hand to hand or knife to knife with Jito—" He raised the heavy knife aloft.

A blue blaze of light burst from out the darkness and an automatic barked. The blade of Jito's knife leaped upward, then fell at his feet with a dull tinkle of broken steel. Only the handle remained in the great vaquero's hand.

"Now by the blood of all the saints," Jito marveled. "El Coyote shoots straight."

IT was a silent group that returned to the hacienda. Music still played within the patio, but the grounds were deserted. The people had fled. Don Bob sat smoking beside the fountain, and to him Morales told the brief tale of their past hour. Then again silence fell.

The little lanterns were swinging in the night wind that blew fitfully from the desert, and a few stars hung low over the hills. For a time Adela stood watching them, until at last Morales touched her arm.

"Go, my dear. You are tired."

She turned and smiled a little weary smile. "Until tomorrow," she said, and left them.

Morales watched her pass up the stairs. "Only the very young know how to suffer," he sighed, and turned toward his guests. "It is yet too early for bed. Let us join Jito in the smoking-room. We will all be the better for a little brandy and a cigar." He, too, seemed worn, and his eyes weary, but he smiled that courteous smile of his, and walked toward the outer room.

Jito, enveloped in cigar smoke, sulked in a corner. As the three sank into the deep leather chairs, Morales said: "Gentlemen, there is no adequate way of apologizing for this so painful episode of tonight. Tomorrow I shall want to know from you, Jito, why it was allowed. No, not tonight, tomorrow. Tonight I am *cansado*—tired of the stupidity of your herdsmen. Personally I have not the slightest care what they do, but they must not molest Adela or my guests."

He poured out another brandy. "And now let us talk of more pleasant things, such as—" He waved a hand toward Radcliffe. "I am told that tomorrow Adela will take you out to the Spring of the Saints. It is a very beautiful spot. A good fifteen miles from here, but you are a natural horesman. It will be child's play."

"Who attends them?" asked Jito suddenly from his corner.

Morales looked sharply up. "No one. You know Adela will not have servants on her rides."

But Jito had risen. "I will not have her going unattended. It is—"

"It is what?" Ted asked quietly, but a flush had crept to his face.

For a moment the two men stood at gaze, while Jito seemed to consider his reply.

"For one thing, it is not safe. My uncle knows that. None of the foothill country is safe."

Again Morales raised his hand. "With ten servants or with twenty, would it be any safer? You know it would not."

But Jito only answered stubbornly: "You should not let her go. You should forbid it."

With a faintly amused air the old Spaniard answered: "I should forbid it. Who forbids Adela to do as she likes? Suppose you forbid it, Jito, my child."

Jito walked the length of the room. "I shall tomorrow. You shall see."

"I shall see once more your great capacity for making a fool of yourself."

He turned with the same look of amusement to

the others. "This thing called love, señors, it does not make for rational action. It is to some men as strong drink. It makes my good Jito here act even like a smaller child than God himself made him."

A sudden noise in the doorway drew his attention. A tall vaquero stood in the entrance, dusty sombrero in hand.

"What now?" barked Morales.

"Señor, I would speak with Jito. It is very important," he added quickly.

Jito rose. "What the devil is it, Pedro?"

"They have killed Arturo, señor."

"Who has killed him?"

"Anton, the Yaqui."

"Anton! That Indian killed one of my vaqueros?" He buckled on his spurs. "I go to find Anton."

"We have him outside, señor. We thought it should be you to say whether to kill him or put him in the cell."

Jito turned toward Morales. "Could I have this Indian brought in?"

As Morales nodded, Don Bob rose. "Perhaps we had better go," he suggested, but Morales waved his hand.

"Please stay." Then he added with a thin smile: "This may be interesting. Not often do Jito's boys get themselves killed." He nodded to his ward. "Bring him in, Jito *mio*. You would seem to have your hands well filled with vaqueros and their jubilant ways this night." The old man's spare form shook in silent laughter that was rather horrible to watch.

In a moment two vaqueros had led forward the

Yaqui chieftain, his hands bound behind him, his great chest bare. He stood before his captors and his gaze passed rapidly over the faces of all the men, then came to rest on Jito. The Indian waited for no questioning, but spoke in rapid Spanish.

"Since what time have you mistaken the Yaqui people for peon dogs, big one? Since when is it permitted that your horsemen ride through my village and stampede my horses and frighten my women? It is not very wise for the few to make enemies of the many. Jito, the Mexican, is big and broad of shoulders, and as I stand here he could kill me with those great hands of his, or could call his horsemen to shoot me down. But that, too, would not be wise. My people back in the hills are not so easily killed. Within two days they would sweep over your land like a sea, and the hacienda of Don Paco Morales would be as yesterday."

He turned contemptuously from the Mexican and spoke now to Morales. "We are a free people, and tonight there came among us many horsemen, mad with drink. They came with anger in their eyes when they should have brought friendship. They battered down my lodges, they stampeded my horses, they threatened my young men, and one of them I had to kill. I take no sorrow for that, but unless these bonds are taken from my hands, you, Paco Morales, will take great sorrow, for we Yaqui of the mountains are many and our young men have not forgotten other days. It might be easier to urge them to battle than to hold them back." He stopped speaking.

Morales, without a word, walked up to the man and cut the bonds at his wrists. "My men will trouble you no more," he said slowly. "Go in peace."

Not until the moccasins of the Yaqui had shuffled out through the patio did anyone speak; then with a smile that still held a kind of sinister amusement Morales glanced at Jito. "One more loyal follower like you, Jito *mio*, and I shall be a ruined man. Once the Yaqui joins with this Coyote bandit, your vaqueros will have little time for merriment." A sudden tremor of anger seized him. "Take, for the love of God, your band forever out of my sight." He rose and bowed to Don Bob.

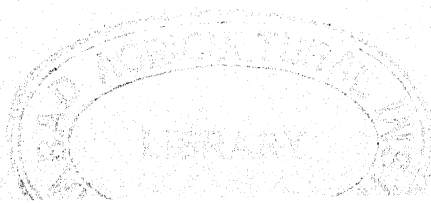
"Never," said the old Spaniard, "have guests of mine suffered such disturbance. You must forgive one who grows too old to remember the demands of hospitality. Now I am very tired. Good night, señors. As for you, Jito, come to my room a moment. There are a few things that must be said."

His gaunt shoulders seemed more bowed as he left the room. Jito followed after a surly nod at the two Americans.

For a time Don Bob smoked on in silence while Ted paced the length of the room.

"It's hideous," Ted exclaimed. "This cold contempt for life these vaqueros have. Morales himself cares nothing. I'm wondering why we continue to take his hand and eat his food."

"My dear fellow, what earthly good would it do to insult him now? Take my word, there are better and more subtle ways. That Yaqui, for instance. He gave



me something to think about." And for a space of many minutes Don Bob smoked, his eyes fixed in thought. At last he shook his head.

"Morales must be worried. It is as if he too felt the breaking up of things. This kingdom of fear that he has built can't go on always. There are mutterings. That Yaqui bluffed his way to freedom. Morales didn't dare hold him. The peons themselves aren't taking things lying down as they once did. And behind all this is the shadow of El Coyote. No, I think Señor Morales has many things to think of this night. Thoughts that will be unwelcome bedfellows for the Spaniard."

But Ted was gazing out toward the desert, and a little smile was playing about his mouth. When he looked up it was obvious he hadn't heard a word of Don Bob's soliloquy, for he murmured: "You should have seen her. She was magnificent."

"My son," answered Don Bob sorrowfully, "when they reach your stage, hope, if any, lies in a good night's rest."

And slipping his arm through Ted's he led him up the stairs.

CHAPTER XV

TWICE in the night Ted awoke to hear rain pattering on the tile roof, but the sunrise was cloudless. Adela waited for him in the patio, and in her face lay no sign of the night's happening, but as they passed down the walk to where the horses stood she looked silently up toward the mesa. High up on its edge, touched with the sun's first rays, glittered the Cross of the Conquerors. Lips slightly parted, she gazed up in a kind of silent communion—then turned toward the man.

"The legend of the Cross may yet be answered," she said slowly, "and the peon find his liberator. I thought so for a moment last night."

She mounted and led the way down the long drive.

"The first morning of creation must have been like this," Ted told her, as they rode through the gate and out toward the desert. "Everything washed and dusted. Those mountains look as if they were only a few miles away."

"They're about thirty. We're going half-way to them, to the Spring of the Saints. There we'll try to eat all the food in our saddlebags and come back through the sunset. A whole day devoted to your lordship. I'm being very nice to you, Ted Radcliffe, for no reason at all."

"You're being quite perfect to me. I'm wondering if it isn't because you pity me for—what's happened," he said.

Leaning forward she fondled the soft ears of her horse.

"I've not felt the least twinge of pity. Why should I, when the future is all ahead of you and you have a mind and a body to do what you want? Besides, you have something I never had—the memory of a father. Mine died when I was too young to remember—I only know he was big and handsome and had a wild Latin temper. And I know he loved my mother very greatly. So don't give me credit for too much charity. These people of mine, they have need of all the charity I possess."

"I love the way you call them your people."

"They *are* my people. Don't forget my mother had Mexican blood in her veins as well as Irish. And she loved this country and these people just as I do. She taught me their legends and their songs. So I am a creature of this desert country." After a long moment she added, "I wish I could make it a country of happiness instead of tears."

"You mean—"

"What you saw last night. That sort of thing. There is a curse of cruelty on the lords of this land. They love cruelty for its own sake. Even my uncle. With me and Jito he is the gentlest of men. I love him. But to him these people in their mean little homes are not people with blood and feelings or with hopes and dreams. They are just things that do his will."

"Jito certainly seems a little inclined that way."

"Oh, Jito is a child, mentally. My uncle is his god. Jito is cruel only as a child is cruel. Sometimes when

I have him to myself I make him sorry. But deep inside he is proud to be the feared leader of my uncle's herdsmen."

At the top of a little knoll she stopped, and together they looked out through the fresh morning air and over the blue sagebrush to where far-off purple mountains cast long shadows across the world. A little breeze stirred the desert stillness with the sound as of very distant waters, and in a kind of enchanted silence those two watched and listened, held by the beauty and peace of it. When at last the girl turned, great tears stood in her eyes.

She whispered, as if half afraid to break the spell: "How wonderful this all is, this beautiful country of mine. Life could be so perfect here. It could be always a land of song and eternal sunshine, a land where everyone might have his little piece of land, his home and his work to do. When I was away at school, like an alien out there in the world, I realized then how much I loved all this desert country of mine. Each night I would pray the Mother of God to show me how I might come back and change this land of slavery into the paradise it should really be. The freedom and hopefulness that in your country you have. And so easily we could have it. Only to change my uncle—that would be enough." She laughed with little mirth. "I came back, I tried to change it all, but ever between me and all I wanted to do was his iron will. Each year he is more obsessed with the desire to be absolute law in everything."

She touched the horse with her spur. "But why

cloud a perfect morning? I had resolved to put all this behind me today—and be gay. If I did not sometimes forget, I should go mad. So now you will tell me about your own country.”

But Ted shook his head. “You already know about my country. Let’s talk of you. You are serious-minded, aren’t you? And yet you told me you’ve been in love.”

“In love? Oh, many times.” She laughed.

“I don’t think I like the thought of your being in love many times.”

“You wouldn’t, Señor Ted. The big, conquering male never does. He wants always to think that the one woman he selects has been dutifully waiting for him through the years. But I am a woman with a past. Back when I was twelve years old I was madly in love with Jito because he could bring me gila monsters in his hands and carry snakes in his blouse, and I couldn’t. And I’ve been long in love with an old priest. Even now I’m in love with him, grown up as I am. You shall see him some day. And I’m in love with still another man, even today.”

“Who?”

“A man older than you. A man of the world.”

“Who?”

“Don Bob. Isn’t he a dear?”

There was a strange quality of relief in Ted’s laugh. “I know one reason why you love him. Bob’s as savage as you over the wrongs of the peon. I’d advise a combination between you and Don Bob and El Coyote. There’s no telling what the three of you couldn’t do.”

“The three of us? You should say the four of us.

Because we'd enlist your talents too. We would have you rub Jito's nose in the dust each morning before breakfast. And now watch that horse of yours, for we're going down into the stream bed, and it's a crazy, crumbling path from here on."

They fell silent, intent on watching the trail, which now sloped rapidly off the mesa and descended abruptly to the dry bottom of the stream.

Chaparral and stunted aspen grew thicker as they twisted their way along the narrow cañon, and for two hours jogged at a slow trot, until the ascending grade told them they were entering the foothills. There they dismounted and led their horses up the steep ascent. The sun was already at its height when the girl pointed to a grove of fir trees on the hill above them.

"It is the Spring of the Saints."

A place of dreamy silences, Ted found it. Cool and shaded after the blazing desert. A stream welled up from among the rocks and along its banks tall firs and pine trees clustered.

"The sacred trees of the Aztec people, those firs," the girl told him. "Men still call them in Spanish 'the religious fir.' Smell how fragrant they are."

They walked knee-deep through rustling ferns. On the knoll behind them stretched a low, rambling wall of stone, and beyond it the gray ruins of a church, with the belfry still standing. Through the windows they could see a rusting bell, silhouetted against the sky.

"The Spanish monks built a monastery here," she said, as they loosened their saddles. "How long they lived here and worshiped God in this quiet place no one

knows. The Indians back in the hills still remember them as the 'good people' but now it is a place of bats and ghosts. Listen to that brook and the wind among the fir tops. I often think this is one of the most peaceful places in the world. One might live here all one's life and just be happy and let the world pass by. As a matter of fact, that is what those old monks did.

"And now, if you will bring those saddlebags, we'll see what they've packed for us."

They ate with all the appetite a long morning ride can give, then lighted cigarettes and smoked. Ted watched her as she lay back on the soft grass, looking up at the dark tree tops. At last he said, "You're a healthy young animal, aren't you?"

"If you mean that I've just eaten enough for two men, I'll have to agree."

"No, but it's been crossing my mind that you're just what old Mother Nature, if she has any plan at all, would want women to be."

"That's too dark a saying, Señor Ted."

"What I'm trying to say is that I find you quite unspoiled by the world. You're neither bored nor bitter, neither are you ready to accept the world as it is. You know there are holes in it, and you try to help. You do help. And there is something of a child in you, too. That swift love of beautiful things you have, your sympathy with all sorrow, your hate of cruel power. So, do you mind if I say I find you perfect and quite adorable?"

Leaning over she laid a cool hand on his. "Don't make love to me, Ted," she smiled.

"It's just because I couldn't make love to you that I can say all this."

"I'm not sure I like that either. Explain why couldn't you make love to me."

"Men tell me you will some day be the richest woman in all north Mexico."

"Well?"

"Well, I am Ted Radcliffe, the poorest man in all Mexico—north or south—gentleman at large, and with a future all to be made."

She smiled again. "I see." Then, after a little she added: "Ted, I told you last night, if you ever fall in love, don't bother that head of yours about whether the girl is rich or poor. Only very old and very wise people do that, and they're always wrong."

"What should I say to her, Sphinx?"

"Just say that you love her. Isn't that enough? Why clutter it up with an inventory of one's possessions? After all, life can be made so simple, just as simple as it is here, where we are now, with all the ugliness and the difficulties left out."

"I'm wondering what your uncle would say if some nameless youth tried to teach that doctrine to you?"

The girl's laughter seemed to fill the glade.

"If I should fall in love with anyone except some Mexican or Spaniard of an old family, uncle would probably turn me out into the world. To him my only purpose in life should be to marry someone worthy to be master of the hacienda of Paco Morales. He used to send me to Mexico City every winter, hoping I'd fall in love with some aristocratic youth."

"And Jito?"

"I think Jito has been much happier since I refused both him and the others."

"And you have refused?"

"Oh, I've refused Jito at least a hundred times. The last time was about a week ago. I think if I accepted Jito he would be a broken man. He would have nothing to scowl about, and he would have no reason to strut gloomily back and forth, enjoying a broken heart. Jito, in many ways, is a dear, but that is all. Some day I'll pick Jito out a nice girl and he will spend the rest of his life quite happily, bullying her and being worshiped by her."

Ted rolled over on his back and looked up at the tree tops.

"I'm beginning to find you out, Adela."

She mimicked extreme terror. "Heaven forbid. So soon?"

"So soon. You've led me to believe that you are an extremely calculating little person, and you do it, I think, to conceal another much nicer little person who is really you. One who is wildly in love with life, but who at times is greatly afraid that this life—if she lets it—may do something to her heart."

Turning on her elbow she watched him smilingly. "Wonderful man," she mocked. "So I'm really wearing a mask?"

He nodded. "And you change the mask so quickly I'm never quite sure whether you're a little irresponsible desert child with never a care under all that coppery hair—"

"Or what?" she challenged.

"Or a rather wistful, rather lonely princess, not very happy, perhaps, but lovely beyond all words, and like all princesses unattainable."

She rose and dusted the crumbs of lunch from her lap. "Well, there's no use expecting wisdom from a great big good-looking boy, is there? And in the meantime, if we're to get back before dark, we had better tighten these cinches and start."

But once more she looked about her at the quietly running brook beneath them and the quietly sighing trees above. She raised both hands high above her head and breathed deeply the fragrant air. "Just the same," she murmured, "all life could be quiet and stately and full of great beauty like this, couldn't it?"

CHAPTER XVI

MOUNTING slowly, as if reluctant to break the spell, they followed the little stream up the slope to where it narrowed and at last lost itself among the firs. Adela stopped. She frowned at her watch.

"We're going to be later than the very devil, unless—" She swerved her horse, seized with a sudden thought. "Instead of following that winding trail, let's cut across here and pick it up north of the foothills. That will save us at least an hour."

Ted groaned. "If all the hours I've lost following shortcuts were placed end to end—" he began.

"I know. They'd reach back to the Ark. But after all we can't miss the desert, and we must save time. So don't be so solemn. Take that lumbering horse out of my way and I'll show you some plain and fancy guiding."

"God help us all," was Ted's only comment, as he fell in behind.

It was hard going. The way led up the side of a cañon, and at its top they followed a dim game trail over a grassy meadow and down again into a thicket of chaparral that tore at their riding breeches and pulled continually at their arms. It was a hot and breathless place, hemmed in by foothills. For an hour they rode in silence, then she stopped.

"I don't like the way this trail's leading," she told him.

Ted laughed outright. "Then you're hard to please.

The trail's been leading so many ways that some of them should meet your approval." He pointed to a gnarled, lightning-shattered pine. "We've passed that monarch of the forest three times in the last half-hour."

"You're a shameless, barefaced liar, my boy. If you don't like my guiding, you try it."

"Not today. You guide this week and I'll try my hand at it next."

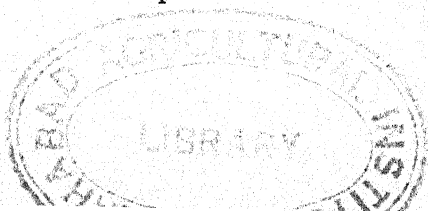
Without answering she turned her mare and, glancing at the western sun, laid a course due north. So a half-hour passed and at its end they stopped on the edge of a deep cañon. A narrow trail made by deer or cattle and washed by heavy rains led steeply downward. It was hardly more than a series of irregular rocky steps in the face of the cliff, and dubiously they looked at the trail, then at each other.

Adela shook her head. "Not too good. But they're used to rough going, these horses, and, after all, we've got to get across. We'd better lead them down."

Ted dismounted. He looked down into the granite, shadowy depths of the cañon. He frowned at the trail. "I'll go first," he suggested.

From the start it was plain that the desert horses had no great liking for what must have seemed to them a very crazy proceeding. Ted's roan pulled abruptly back on the bridle, then stepped gingerly forward, sniffing at each step, shaking his head in disapproval.

"You'd better wait until I get clear," Ted called back. "There's no use in both getting stuck at the bottom of this ill-favored place."



She nodded, and he caught a look of anxiety in her eyes.

Very carefully the man led on. At least the path was not slippery. He held the reins loosely, letting the horse choose his steps. Over half-day down, now, and the worst seemed already behind him. And perhaps they might safely have made that hazardous descent had not disaster chosen to place a loose rock in the horse's path. Ted heard the horse stumble and felt a sudden tug on the bridle. He turned in time to see the big roan's forefeet miss the path and plunge forward. The reins were torn from his hand, and in another instant the horse had crashed among the rocks and cactus beneath.

Frantically Ted scrambled down and reached the horse's side. One look at the legs and the man turned away, sick at heart. He reached into the saddle pocket and, pulling out the automatic, shot twice. As the sound of the shots rattled and echoed up the narrow cañon, he heard the girl running down the trail.

"There was no other way," he said. "It was a long fall."

"I know, I could see from above." Terror stood in her eyes. "It was my fault. Thank God it wasn't you." She bit her lip. "Let's go back up."

Ted took off the saddle and lifted it to a high rock, then followed the girl to the rim above.

"The horse is out of pain?" Adela asked.

"He's quite dead."

"Poor old fellow."

She walked a little way down the path and stood without a word gazing across the cañon. After a few moments she returned.

"And now about us. What are we going to do with one horse?"

"We can't be more than twenty miles from home," Ted estimated. "I can walk as fast as your mare until we get out on the plains, then you could gallop ahead and send a horse out for me. If I have to spend a night on the desert, that's no great hardship."

Adela shook her head. "It's not quite so simple. For one thing, I'm not sure we will get out of these foothills before dark, and we haven't crossed that cañon yet."

Ted slipped the automatic into his pocket. "At any rate, we'd better get going. I'll walk ahead and we'll skirt the cañon. There must be some break in it that we can cross."

But crossing the cañon seemed no nearer a possibility when, at the end of an hour, they stopped again on the edge of its vertical rim. Already the shadows were lengthening, and a sudden coolness in the air told of evening's coming. Though neither of them spoke, to both came the thought that a night on the edge of the desert awaited them. Once luck favored them. Just before dusk the cañon headed abruptly into a broad hillside, and in half an hour they had crossed and at a fast walk were descending the long slope to the last outpost of the foothills. Above the coolness of the hills puffs of hot, dry air came to them, telling of the nearness of the desert. The trees were sparser and more gnarled, and on the south slope of the knolls cactus was reaching back out of the sand.

Their throats were dry, and once they stopped to drink sparingly from the canteen in Adela's saddle

pocket. Then on again, and as the last light faltered in the west, they emerged from the timber and looked down upon that world of sand and cactus, that still unconquered mystery men call the desert.

Ted's eyes sought the far horizon. Nothing but purple mists and darkening sky. No sight of human life.

Adela was looking to the west. "I think I've found my stupid self at last," she said, "but we're miles west of where we should have struck the desert. That promontory over there, that far one looking a little like a bird's head—I think that's Eagle Rock. It's ten miles from there to the ranch."

"And fifteen from here to the rock," Ted estimated. "Twenty-five miles for a tired horse. Why don't you ride in while it's cool and I can camp here until tomorrow. I hate to see you take the desert alone, yet the mare will guide you home, won't she?"

For a moment the girl sat in thought, then deliberately she swung out of the saddle and took off the cinch. "It's better for us to spend the night here."

"But your uncle will be wild with anxiety."

"Of course he will. And I'll catch what the major once called 'merry old hell' tomorrow, but I haven't the heart to make this beast face twenty-five miles more. Besides, I don't want to leave you here."

"What could happen to me?"

"Lots of terrible things. For one thing, anyone as dumb as I've turned out to be might not be able to find you in the morning. Besides, I'm tired."

"But—"

"Ted, look around and gather some soft stuff to lie

on, and stop talking. I've decided to compromise myself." She smiled like a wayward child. "What uncle will say tomorrow isn't part of today's troubles. Really this sort of thing is good for him. It gives him something to think about besides El Coyote."

Slowly she pulled off her riding boots and gingerly rubbed her insteps, then looked up.

"There's a lot of lunch still in that saddlebag, Don Ted, and some spring water in the canteen."

Radcliffe laid on the ground what remained of the lunch, then sat beside her. He got out his cigarettes and divided them into two piles.

"When the last one is smoked, we go to sleep."

With his knife he cut dry branches of chaparral and soon had a small fire blazing.

"Not that we need the heat," he commented, "but this is always the thing to do. Besides, I like the way it makes your eyes glisten."

"These glistening eyes are going to be closed in sweet slumber before many cigarettes. I must be in sad condition to tire from a thirty-mile ride." She wiggled her toes before the fire.

Ted went again to the horse and brought up the saddle-blanket. Adela sighed in contentment. "Not half bad, is it?" She yawned while the smoke from their cigarettes drifted toward the crackling flames. "Ever since I can remember I've wanted to get lost in the desert," she added.

"By yourself?"

"*Dios*, no. Always with some big, broad-shouldered man who would find me and put blankets over my

feet. Thanks. I've spent many nights on the desert, out with the cattle hands, but I've never been lost. Sometimes, I remember, I would imagine myself lost, and then this unknown horseman would always come galloping over the sands and snatch me up into the saddle and take me home. And sometimes I would be lost and couldn't get home and would spend the night out here where the coyotes would come down and glare into the fire. That always gave me a delightfully goose-flesh feeling. Do boys ever have such foolish dreams?"

"Sometimes. What was your dashing rescuer like?"

"Oh, he was always changing. I was very fickle about my escorts. At times he was dark and spoke in Spanish and had a mandolin hung over his saddle, and sometimes he was slender and soft-voiced and had blue eyes. Yes, there were all kinds. After all, why limit yourself to one man in your dreams? But then, you see, I've never known men except the gilded youths of Mexico City, where uncle sent me each year. Even when I was in school in the States, my uncle gave strict orders." She looked up with those frank blue eyes. "You know, besides Don Bob, I've never really known any Americanos."

"No gringos?" He smiled.

She shook her head. "Certainly no very nice ones—like you."

Ted threw mesquite on the fire until it leaped again and crackled like a thousand roasting chestnuts. On the farther side of the fire he spread out the girl's poncho and placed the saddle at its head. The saddle-blanket was already dry and warm from the flames, and this

he laid over the poncho. The result he contemplated dubiously.

"I've seen softer-looking beds, but it will be warm enough unless the night turns cool. Try it."

Obediently she rolled up in the blanket and laid her head on the saddle. Looking up she made a face at him.

"This isn't going to be either warm or soft, big man, but it's life in the great Southwest."

She closed her eyes. "*Dios*, but I'm tired," she murmured.

For an hour Ted sat smoking and at last, replenishing the fire with wood, he lay down beside it. Already the girl's eyes were closed, and her hands were clasped about the saddle-horn. He stooped and pulled the blanket higher about her throat, for a cool current of air was pouring down out of the mountains. For a brief second she opened her eyes.

"You're a dear," she told him, and went to sleep again.

CHAPTER XVII

DAWN had already brightened into sunrise when Ted awoke. He rose, cold and stiff from hours on the hard sand, and looked about him. Mist was still rising from the desert, and as yet the sunlight held no warmth. Tethered in a clump of mesquite, the mare raised her head and whinnied impatiently.

Ted looked up. "I know," he said half aloud, "you're hungry and thirsty, and you've got nothing on me."

A rustling in the saddle blanket made him turn. Two sleepy eyes were being rubbed, and a mop of hair frantically smoothed into submission.

"If you look at me now I'll take the veil," a sleepy voice warned him. "These open-work dressing-rooms have their drawbacks."

So he set about arranging what little they had left of the food, and slowly saddled Adela's mare. At last he came back to the gray embers of the fire, and at her low laugh looked up.

She was pulling on her boots. "When uncle catches up with us, all that has ever happened is going to seem dull and tame," she said, and for no reason at all she hummed a Spanish song.

"When Jito catches up, I'll have a first-class duel on my hands," he prophesied, "and perhaps another with your uncle."

"Oh no. Uncle would never descend to anything so uncertain. He'll just order his vaqueros to tear you to pieces." Then, suddenly serious, she added. "It is pos-

sible that Jito will be raving when he finds us together. I'm depending on you to help me. Even if it's terribly hard for you."

"I promise. But if he comes at me with blood in his eyes, I may have to do a little shadow boxing."

"He must not. I couldn't endure a quarrel between you two."

Her hand touched his arm and she looked up at him. "Out here in this desert country one hasn't too many friends. Our friendship, it has been a very beautiful beginning. I don't want to lose it. I don't want anything to spoil it."

"Nothing could spoil it," he answered. For a long moment they stood silent, close to each other, scarcely breathing. Their lips made no sound, spoke no word, while a message, formless but infinitely precious, passed between them as they stood there on the desert's edge. Then together they walked toward the horse, still waiting in silent disapproval of delay.

As he stooped to hold her stirrup, Adela laid both hands on Ted's shoulders. In her own eyes he caught a shadow of foreboding. He felt her fingers tighten for a moment.

"It has been good, this being alone together back in the hills. I want to feel there is a bond between us two, whatever comes." Her fingers, still clinging, slipped down his arms, then suddenly she released him and swung into the saddle.

"I'm going to ride the first hour and you'll ride the second hour," she told him, as they turned toward the dark outline of Eagle Rock. "Even in riding boots I

can walk with a fine swinging stride that's a joy to see."

But walking was to prove unnecessary. Far down among the mesquite they first saw a faint movement that neared and became a cavalcade of people and horses slowly making its way out of the desert up toward the slopes these two were descending. For a time they watched the slow, trudging figures, then Adela clapped her hands in delight.

"It's Anton, and his Yaquis, returning to their mountain home. He will let you have something with four legs."

Ted's thoughts flashed back to the encounter between the Yaqui and Morales two nights ago. For a moment he hesitated. But already one of Anton's men caught sight of them and called back to the others. Almost at once three warriors detached themselves and pounded up the slope at a dead run. Anton himself greeted them, holding the hand of each a moment in his own while he listened silently to the girl's tale. At times his black eyes turned to the man beside her, but always they returned to Adela. At last he stepped forward and put the reins of his own horse in Ted's hand.

"Yours to ride," he announced in curt, unaccustomed English, and there was a great friendliness in his smile. "My young men follow tomorrow and bring horse back." Then he turned to the girl, speaking in Spanish too rapid and low for Ted to understand. At the end he touched the girl's hand, nodded to Radcliffe, and before either of them could thank him had jumped up behind the horse of one of his braves.

Ted mounted. "That's what I call service. What did Anton say?"

"He was telling me the way and offering to lend me one of his men to go with us. But we don't need them. According to Anton, two hours' ride will put us in sight of the hacienda. And now let's see what that Indian pony's good for." At a fast canter she led the way out across the brown sand. The sun rose higher. Far out toward the horizon a thousand heat waves shimmered, and once to the east the mirage of a lake arose, beckoned, and faded. For a time they rested, then pressed on down the long slope. Near the bottom they reined their horses to a halt, and in the same instant both made out the swaying trees behind the hacienda, barely ten miles away.

The girl looked back at the circuitous way they had come. She shook her head, and a look of chagrin came into her eyes.

Ted laughed. "As a pathfinder—" he began.

"Don't. We must have come miles out of our way. I'm thinking of uncle. What a night he must have spent—and what he's going to say."

"But what can he say? What is there to say? We went riding and got lost for a night in the foothills. He'll probably joke about your woodcraft and drop it."

Adela made no reply. She was looking down toward a dry watercourse where, in a clump of oak brush, a dark object moved. She shaded her eyes against the desert's glare, then nodded.

"It's Jito. He's been hunting us." She waved her hand, but the far-off rider made no sign.

"This will do it," Ted said, and fired twice in the air.

A moment later the distant rider stopped in his tracks, wheeled and came at full gallop toward them.

"That young man's face," said Adela, "would seem to mean a tempestuous welcome. Wait here. I want to deal with him myself. No, wait, please, for me." She spurred her horse ahead as Jito's black, foam-flecked stallion thundered up to them. The Mexican's eyes were blazing. Ted watched quietly.

Disregarding the girl, Jito urged his panting horse to where Radcliffe stood. It seemed a mighty effort for him to speak calmly.

"What happened?" he demanded. His voice was strangely tight.

"We were lost," Adela quietly answered.

"Lost!" He lashed the word back at her, and his eyes went red. "One does not get lost on a desert that one has known always. But it is not with you I talk. Perhaps you too will tell me you were lost, señor, and then I can answer you as a man to a man." He leaned threateningly forward, but with the flash of a quirt Adela forced her horse between the two men, who towered above her, silent and ominous.

"Jito!" Adela's voice had taken on a quality that made even the maddened Mexican draw back. With her quirt she pointed out across the desert. "This very moment you will turn your horse and go back to the hacienda. Tell my uncle we are coming. You are going to say no word either to Señor Radcliffe or to me. If you do, I swear by Our Lady that from now on you

will be nothing more to me than one of your vaqueros. For me you will not exist. Now go, before I forget we are friends."

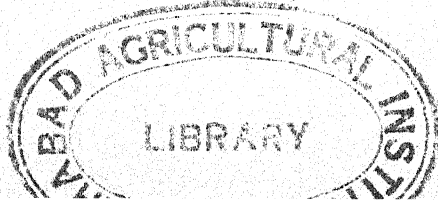
Sullenly Jito looked into her eyes. Once he started to dismount. Once he half turned toward the man who sat his horse so quietly. Again he looked fully into the girl's face. No mistaking the message there.

"*Su servidor,*" he murmured, and drove the spurs into his horse.

Ted saw that her hand trembled a little as again she took up the reins and tried to smile.

"It's just a little wearing to be surrounded by men all one's life and by men's standards." Her voice had gone suddenly weary. "Your sex is not very clever or very subtle. For we have spent a night on the desert, you and I. Civilized people would laugh at our dilemma and forget, but Jito and my uncle, they will never forget. They will never trust. It will either be a plot of yours to seduce me, or a deliberate insult to tradition." In sudden impatience she struck the mare and galloped forward.

"I want to get this over with," she called back to him, and led the way out over the desert. Ted urged the Indian pony after her. The pace increased. He wiped the moisture from his forehead. How that girl could ride! Sitting lightly in the saddle she followed every motion of the mare as she galloped and swerved among the cactus, her long slender legs claspings the animal's sides. Once the mare stumbled, but Adela only laughed and urged her to greater speed. "Who cares for uncles?" she called back, in that sudden dis-



concerting leap of hers from sadness to gaiety. Ted smiled grimly.

"If Morales pounces on her too abruptly, he'll probably learn a lot in a short space of time," thought Radcliffe.

At the end of an hour they were cantering between the great iron gates and up the stone drive to the hacienda. Two peons ran out to take the horses, and as Ted dismounted he moved his legs with a little grimace.

"This bedding out among desert sands might become wearisome in time."

As he reached up to lift Adela to the ground, they both caught sight of Don Bob looking amusedly down from the balcony. For some reason Bob seemed vastly pleased. Elaborately ignoring them, he directed his remarks to the horses.

"One difficulty with the younger generation," he told the inattentive horses, "or perhaps I should say still another difficulty is that they always confirm your worst suspicions."

"The worst suspicions of an old, hardened sinner like you must be pretty black," Ted countered.

"Oh, they're beyond polite expression. All night I had hoped this poverty-stricken youth would have sense enough to elope with the wealthiest girl in Mexico, and here he comes gravely back. I suppose now he will tell us he was lost."

"We were."

From his perch above, Don Bob nodded sadly. "They always are. Always. One would think that as

each generation comes of age it would think of something new. But they don't. It's always 'we were lost.'” He sighed.

Adela pulled off her riding hat and whipped the dust from about her shoulders.

“I suppose uncle is simmering,” she called up.

“Simmering, my dear girl? He is long past that. Toward dusk last night he was simmering. Today he has reached the stage of superheated steam.”

Turning to Ted, the girl said gloomily, “Let's go in and get it over with.”

But as Radcliffe stepped forward a gesture from Don Bob called him back. “Whatever Morales says,” he whispered, “don't let him pick a quarrel. I have a particular reason.”

Ted nodded and followed the girl into the house.

In the patio sat Morales and Jito, and as Adela entered, the *vaquero* rose. The older man watched them for a moment with haggard eyes. Quietly the girl stepped forward and knelt beside his chair. She took his hand and laid it against her cheek.

“I am sorry, my uncle, so very sorry. Did you worry much?”

“Tell me exactly what happened,” he answered coldly.

“We loitered, we were late in leaving the spring, and I tried a shorter way down over the limestone cliffs. Then the roan fell and broke his leg, so we killed him. Night came on before we reached the desert. We camped until daylight.”

“The mare could have shown you the way.”

"But Ted couldn't walk all night through the desert."

"Couldn't you have ridden double?"

She turned with a vexed laugh and pointed at Radcliffe. "Look at him, uncle. Over two hundred pounds of bone and muscle. Do you think my little mare could carry both of us?"

But the implacable eyes never left her face.

"Would it have been extremely dangerous for Señor Radcliffe to remain on the desert until we could have sent horses to him?"

"It would have been difficult, perhaps, to find him the next day. Remember, I had no idea where we were. Besides, why should I leave him alone? I got him into it."

The black eyebrows raised on his pale forehead. "You ask why you should have left him? Are you some peon woman not to consider the place you have as my niece and mistress of this hacienda?"

"But what has that—"

His fist crashed down on the arm of his chair. "Do not dare to ask that stupid question. Would you make my name a thing to laugh at? In my day a girl would not even ride alone with a man."

The girl was fighting to keep her anger from rising, but now her eyes flashed dangerously.

"I know they wouldn't. And why? They weren't allowed because they couldn't be trusted. You raised them like irresponsible animals, and they were what you made them. But I'm not! I'm not an animal, neither am I something that needs to be guarded. I guard myself. Here, or in the desert, or wherever I find myself."

"You call it guarding yourself to cast suspicion on your own sanctity."

"Oh, damn suspicion—yes, damn suspicion and everyone who dares hint of the things you dare not say. Let's be frank for once. You think of virtue as something so difficult for us women to keep that you men must protect us, and so you guard us until you are ready to sell that highly valued commodity to the right buyer. And I tell you that you are not fit to protect me. I alone can do that. Don't you think I can see the insult that lies behind your evasions? It is the same insult that lay in Jito's eyes. You are both thinking: 'What are they to each other? Is he her lover?'"

"Stop. I forbid you to speak."

"I won't stop. I am sick for all time of these evasions. Listen, my uncle. I have known for many years there are two sexes in the world. I know how babies come, so let us keep to realities and frank truth, or we will be strangers always. If ever I love and wish to give myself to a man, no fear of you will stop me. But I will never lie to you. I want to be first with you always. I want you to love me and to be a comrade, just as you have been a parent, but don't you see we never can if you won't trust? I tell you you are living in an age that's past, and it is today that we have got to face. I'm not something too irresponsible to be left by myself. I am a girl of this century, and you are of past centuries. Even now you sit there with doubt and anger and suspicion written across your face. Can't you even trust me?"

In cold fury he hurled at her. "You are the daughter

of your mother, and as the daughter of a half-caste you have acted."

She rose, trembling with anger. "Have I? Perhaps because I am a half-caste. Perhaps it is my mother's Mexican blood that makes me wayward, so that I have spent a night with this man out on the desert. *Bueno*, my uncle. I have talked and you will not listen. Now I will talk no longer. From now on I will never say one single word of what happened out there last night. And whether I stay another hour in this house of suspicion and vile thinking, I myself shall decide. Now, you can sit and nourish your own thoughts, whatever they are. Yes, and for your further peace of mind, I do this."

With one step the girl was at Ted's side, and now she reached up and, drawing down his face, kissed his lips.

"Remember that, my uncle, when you are thinking of last night."

With a little sob she turned and ran from the room.

FOR a long time after Adela had gone, the old man sat with head sunk forward. Then, with something that sounded like a sigh, he looked up at the tall man still standing before him. For a long time he looked. He seemed to be weighing some thought. At last he rose.

"Señor Radcliffe, forget all that you have heard and seen here. Those who have youth can never understand the tragedy of outliving one's time. Perhaps some day will be a language in which one may speak across the generations, but it is not yet. Of your own conduct, I have nothing to reproach you. And now, if you will excuse me—"

To Ted came again the feeling that this coolly speaking, courteous Spaniard was acting a carefully chosen part. Those eyes seemed to veil a cold malevolence that the calm words could not quite conceal. He answered quietly:

"I am the one to go."

The old man nodded and put out his hand. "Perhaps it is best. But not in anger. Let us part saying, as my forefathers said, 'May you go with God.'"

He seemed very old and very lonely as he turned and walked with short, uneven steps across the patio and up the stairs.

In the guest room Don Bob was standing by the window knocking the ash from his pipe. He looked up anxiously as the boy entered.

"Well? Harsh words?"

Ted shook his head. "None. But there's no doubt the old fellow hates me. I think I'd better go. There was a scene between Adela and Morales that wasn't pretty, and if chance throws Jito and me together today it's likely to end in some broken furniture. Tell me what happened last night when we didn't come."

Don Bob reached for a cigar and laughed. "I felt like a lion tamer in a thunderstorm. By dusk Jito had driven Adela's roadster three times down to the end of the road. Morales remained calm, but he got more sullen as the hours passed. By nightfall both of them had forgotten they ever knew English, and we all did what little talking there was in Spanish. It must be easier to say pleasant things in Spanish while you're thinking murder in your heart. Before dawn I heard Jito saddle up and ride off. An hour ago he came back, looking like a soul let loose from hell. He called to Morales that Adela and you were found. Then I heard some whispered sentences, and once Morales raised his voice to say, 'Remember, no violence.' The rest of their talk was behind closed doors. It's all easy enough to understand. You happen to be the first American who has ever taken Adela anywhere. Always she has been guarded by the rigid conventions of this place. Only for you she has let down the bars. And Jito, of course, would sell his soul and all the universe for Adela.

"But what isn't so easy for me to understand is why Morales has been so civil to you. It would be more like him to order you thrown out the door—there'd be absolutely nothing to prevent. There's something unexplained back of that. Whatever it is, remember this:

you've made two enemies today, and one of them is the most powerful in the border country. An enemy out here is something to be reckoned with. You know, I'm not so sure but that it might be a great deal better for you to go back East."

Ted had been throwing his clothes into the suitcase. At the last words he raised his head.

"I'll see them damned first. I'm going to make my home out here in spite of every Spaniard and vaquero on the border. Besides, there's a reason—" Raising his eyes he caught the smile on his friend's lips. "You're joking about my running away."

"Perhaps. But I, too, was thinking about that reason." Presently his face grew serious again. "And yet, as to Adela—"

"I know. I've said nothing, Bob."

Bob looked at him with eyes in which amusement and affection were mingled. "With that cherub face of yours, old son, you wouldn't have to write an essay about it, would you?" Then he too busied himself with the packing.

Only Morales appeared to speed their journey. Adela, he explained, was in her room, and he thought best not to disturb her. The señors would understand. With Ted he shook hands gravely and for a moment he held the hand of Don Bob between both his own.

"We must see more of each other, old friend," he said. "We have more in common than boundary fences, no?"

Ten miles down the road Don Bob turned the roadster south from the Verdi highway and followed a sandy, winding trail toward the foothills.

"Last night in one of his communicative moments, Morales told me the major was making his headquarters not far from here. I want to run over and learn what the old soldier has found about El Coyote."

"Blount would be foolish to tell you, wouldn't he? I have a suspicion that you're in cahoots with the bandit."

Bob laughed. "Like Price, I'm at least sympathetic. Compared to most honest politicians, that bandit is a gentleman of high integrity. I deplore his tendency to walk off with the other fellow's cattle once in a while. Still, that's necessary too. You can't live on high humanitarian motives alone out here. Occasionally you must have a good juicy beefsteak, for yourself and your fellow idealists."

Then, each busy with his own thoughts, they fell silent for an hour, while the car wound its way toward the broken country of the low foothills. At last Bob pointed. "There's Blount's camp, hidden away as carefully as the Washington Monument. Tell me, what self-respecting bandit could ever miss that? Let's see what the major knows."

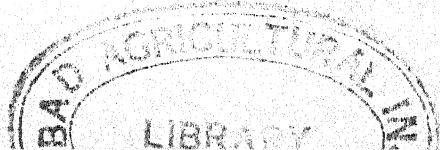
But the major, it turned out, knew surprisingly little. A week's constant patrol of the desert had yielded nothing, and so far the cavalrymen who were stationed at the few waterholes had learned nothing. Two sergeants alone had anything to report, and their report was far from satisfactory to Blount. They had camped at a small waterhole, and in the night a lone rider had ridden up and stolen both their horses from under their very noses. Next day the stolen horses were found tied

to the corral in Blount's camp. The major was very bitter about it all. Soldiers, he seemed to feel, ought not to be treated that way. It wasn't good, orthodox warfare. "Damned impudent bravado," he stormed, looking very fierce and military in his khaki. Then his face brightened.

"But we're combing this God-forsaken country from the U. S. border to the high range. That means we'll soon be even, as far as knowledge of the country goes. We're mapping every stream and waterhole—he'll have to step high, wide, and handsome to keep ahead of us. And we're showing the natives that it isn't the great thing to be one of El Coyote's friends. They're still slow in giving information. It's been a case of '*no sabe*' ever since we started. They know—of course they know. But they're loyal, and they're terribly afraid of the death that overtook the last poor devil who gave information on El Coyote.

"But there's one chap I've got my eyes on. I think he could tell a lot if he dared. He is one of Morales's men, but I suspect he is or was part of El Coyote's band. Two nights ago he came to my tent and wanted to know if I would send him with a guard out of the country if he gave us information about the bandit. I told him if he gave the right kind of information we would give him a guard to any place he wanted to go, and I guaranteed protection against revenge. My Spanish isn't too good, as you know, and we didn't get together. He wasn't quite satisfied, and he went away, but he's coming back."

The major waved his hand. "Sooner or later that's



the way it's going to go. It may not be this fellow, and may not be now. But next day or next month a man will come willing to talk if there's gold and protection for him. Morales will put up the gold and I'll furnish the protection, and then—zip!—the end of El Coyote, and you'll owe me a dinner. In the meantime, it's good practice for the boys and, as Clara says, it reduces my figure to where I can button up last year's vest."

Don Bob looked thoughtful. "It sounds like a drawn-out process. It may take years—unless you learn something in your interview with this fellow."

"If he comes back you will be able to help. I'd like to have you here—you and Morales. That may be next week. You and Morales, with your knowledge of the country, can judge what the information may be worth. Personally, I think the fellow's holding out for a raise in the blood money."

"He's very wise. I should hold out for a great deal. He had better get enough gold to take him out of the country and keep him in a state of pleasant drunkenness for his natural life; otherwise he is risking too much for too little."

"You and Price will always believe the arm of El Coyote is all-powerful."

"My friend, I think El Coyote, if he wanted to, could kill you, or Morales, or Ted here, within the week, and get away with it."

"Then why the devil doesn't he?"

"Because it wouldn't serve his ends. It would only be a nasty killing. Suppose he killed Jito and Morales too. That wouldn't end the system that's been built up. Sooner or later someone would take their place. The

Coyote isn't playing for that. He's playing for the whole blessed country to be with him when he moves. And once the country is with him there will be some new history written on the border. As for you, major *mio*, I absolutely believe that there isn't a move you make he doesn't know, and I don't think all these healthy soldier boys of yours will get him yet. So don't tell me too much about your plans, for I've still a sneaking sympathy for the way he plays whatever cards destiny gives him. He's fighting against the forces of two nations. But I'll be glad to come over to your conference any time, if only to watch old Morales."

Cautiously the major looked about him, and from his face both Ted and Bob knew some secret was about to be delivered.

"This is not to go any farther," warned the little major, and again he looked about him and lowered his voice. "El Coyote may turn out to be a woman!"

Don Bob threw back his head in that silent laugh of his. "A Boadicea of the border, eh?"

The idea seemed to delight him. "Won't you catch hell in Washington if it is a woman! If you hunt her down you'll be a brute, and if she escapes you they'll say you've been made a fool of by a weak, defenseless female. If I were you, I'd resign. But whoever told you that rot?"

"I can't tell you. I only say it may turn out that way. You know yourself no one has actually seen the bandit."

"I have a suspicion that Lopez, the traitor, saw him that night along the Verdi trail. Men say his eyes were

frozen with fear and not pleasant to look at." Bob shook his head. "No, major, I shouldn't lay any trap for a lady bandit. I think when you find your quarry it will be a man. Probably about the size of Ted, here."

"If he is that size, it must be Jito. No one else on the border carries all that beef."

Again Bob smiled. "Well, it might not be a bad idea to look into Jito's activities, though I strongly doubt if it will teach you much."

They left soon after, and in the car as they sped toward Verdi, Bob was in high spirits. The idea of the major's "lady bandit," as he called her, delighted him.

"I've half a mind to spread the rumor in Verdi that it's the major's wife, adopting this rôle to give her husband exercise. But why should the man even for a moment suspect such nonsense? It must be the military mind at work."

Outside the gate at Bob's hacienda they stopped, and Ted stepped out to lay down the bars.

As Bob drew up before the house a servant ran forward.

"Señor," he shouted in Spanish, while still afar, "you have heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Last night El Coyote came to the upper camp and stole twenty steers. Twenty of the señor's best cattle, that son of a devil."

For a time Don Bob looked at Ted, then at last his lips curved in a little smile. "Now doesn't that beat hell?" he pondered, reaching for a cigarette. "And after all the nice things I've said about him, too."

CHAPTER XIX

WITHIN an hour Don Bob had left for the north ranch, sending Ted to Verdi for any news that might have reached there, and it was not until late the following afternoon that Bob returned.

Ted, just back from a round of the near-by camps, had already begun dinner when he heard the jingle of spurs on the porch outside. A moment later the rancher joined him.

"Too tired to eat." Bob sank into the nearest chair. "But give me a dozen cups of coffee. What did you learn?"

Ted shook his head. "Nothing. Neither in Verdi nor in the camps. And you?"

"I've ridden all over that upper country for signs. Finally I lost trace of the steers among the sandhills. It's blowing hard up there, like blasts from a furnace. It would wipe out the tracks of a dinosaur. Lord, that coffee's welcome!"

"Bob, do you think El Coyote did this?"

The rancher smiled. "I don't. My boys can't tell me much. They only know that half a dozen Mexican horsemen rode down on the herd, cut out twenty of the best steers and drove them south toward the line. Only two of the boys saw it happen, and they very prudently waited in the brush until the job was done. Then they galloped back with the news. But the big white horse that El Coyote rides wasn't seen. My boys are sure of that."

He drank two cups of black coffee, then, lost in thought, chewed absently on the end of a cigar. He seemed to reach some decision, for abruptly he rose. "I still have one or two questions about this thing, and tired or not tired I'm going over to Mendoza's. You'd better come along. Mendoza's is part of your education."

"I've heard that name."

"Of course you have. Mendoza's is the greatest institution for vice and unvarnished evil in Verdi—or in all the borderland, for that matter. It is the one place where at some time or other you will find anyone you are looking for. If you are patient, he or she is sure to show up at Mendoza's."

"It's a kind of roadhouse, isn't it?"

"Oh, much more than that. It's a cabaret, dance hall, gambling hell, and inn about which the least said the better. It is there you can find the best-dressed and the most dangerous women of the border. It is there, too, you can find all the plain and fancy gunmen you may ever need. Jito recruits his vaqueros there. If you want anyone killed, there are a dozen men who will be eager to quote you rates over at Mendoza's. Human life varies from fifty pesos up. Abduction is much more reasonable. Mendoza himself, the old rascal, has the best wine and the worst morals in Mexico. He has deserved killing dozens of times, but his passing will be a loss to the border. For Mendoza, be it remembered, is a great artist in this intricate game of life."

"Is that where the girl they call Ann Reed lives?"

Bob's eyes were raised quickly. "What do you know of Ann Reed?"

"Only that she is a singer over there and that she is one of the most beautiful women on the border. I remember somebody at the major's saying she had the voice of an angel with a lost soul."

"Not a gallant saying. Some kindly woman must have thought of that. Yes, it's over there that Ann Reed lives and makes men for a time forget that they're just funny, little fighting animals with brief, unimportant lives to live. You may hear her sing to-night." Then abruptly he asked, "Who said she had a lost soul?"

Ted laughed at the other's sudden intensity. "I've forgotten. What difference does it make?"

"None." But he added as they went to the car, "It's an unintelligent thing to say, isn't it?"

And Ted found himself wondering that Bob should resent the saying.

"Is she an American girl?" he asked, as they drove out into the night.

"To her fingertips. Yet she speaks Spanish as well as I."

"What brought her here?"

"Who can ever answer that question? Life plays one of its little jokes, and we find ourselves out here on the border. You and I, for example."

And beyond that Ted was still in ignorance as to just who Ann Reed might be when a little later they parked the car outside the tall, brilliantly lighted structure that had attained fame throughout the Southwest as the Palace of Mendoza. Somewhere within a band of marimbas was playing Spanish airs, and beyond a half-opened door stretched a long bar, running the

length of the building. The sound of popping corks and cracking ice told them that this portion of Mendoza's at least was not unpatronized.

Bob leading, they entered the great glass-covered patio and walked down a long lane of tables ringed in cigarette smoke. Surrounding the patio crowded tables were scattered in the half-light about the cleared space that Mendoza held for the dancers. A babel of voices, English and Spanish, rose to greet Don Bob. Waiters hurried among the tables, and everywhere Ted was conscious of the hair and shoulders of women, and of the appraising scrutiny of men. As Ted passed, several of the women raised their eyes, stopping for a moment to follow his broad shoulders. Enviously one dance-hall girl whispered to another, "There's a *caballero* for you," then turned wearily back to her companion.

Already both men had passed through the low adobe arch into the patio itself, where, under the ever-changing lights cast from above, two dancers were weaving a slow, sensuous tango for the pleasure of Mendoza's varied clientele. A waiter was bowing before them.

"A table for two, Señor Don Bob?"

They sat just outside the circle of light, and for a time Don Bob smoked in silence.

"The man I want isn't here," he said at last. He rose. "Sit here and watch the dancing, Ted. I'll be back within the half-hour."

Musingly Bob looked at the room filled with women, whose perfume and laughter rose like a spell about

them. "I leave you," he said, "among many attractive playfellows. You know these border people call Mendoza's 'the end of man's desires.' It always seemed a little misleading to me, that phrase. So *cuidado*."

Beyond the patio Bob turned and, mounting a narrow stairway, climbed to the upper floor, then passed down a darkened passage at the farther end of which a yellow lamp gleamed. Before a closed door he stopped and knocked.

"*Quien es?*" Fresh and clear a woman's voice came through the door. An eager voice, and again came the question, this time repeated in English, "Who is it?"

For answer Bob turned the knob and entered.

A girl was sitting there. White, dead-white, her face was—almost too white, although it served to make still larger the great dark eyes, and to enhance the brilliance of her blue-black hair. A vivid, unforgettable face. Yet a face strangely sad, a face that seemed created for the world's happiness, but ever unable to find it. She sat before the mirror in a light peignoir, penciling her lips with deep carmine.

As she looked up the gathering frown melted to a smile of quick welcome. Running to him she passed her long fingers through his hair and kissed him. A long kiss. Her slender body pressed him, while her fingers locked about his neck. She threw back her head and her very eyes caressed him. "Don Bob." The low voice was resonant with adoration. "Don Bob."

Smiling, she added, "Whom others call El Coyote."

HE looked quickly about him, then laid a finger on her lips.

"Dark secrets like that," he cautioned, "deserve closed doors."

"You yourself deserve a closed and bolted door." She drew him to a chair before her dressing table. "It's been days—days and days. Whenever you don't come I want to go to that ridiculous little major over in Verdi and say: 'Give me your bags of gold pesos and I'll tell you who El Coyote is. He is your leading citizen, dear major, but also he is a damned unsatisfactory lover.' Then what would your fat major do?"

"Spank you and send you back to me, I hope. If he let you escape I'd have nothing in the border country to live for."

"Strange man—as if anyone really mattered to you." Again her long white fingers pressed his cheeks. "Even I, who could easily die for you."

He smiled up at her, then abruptly rose. "When are you singing next?"

"Not for an hour—never if you will stay."

"I'd like to stay always, God knows. Here where there is peace and security and a very beautiful child to spoil me. Only—"

"Only you would get so weary of peace and security after a day or two. I know. There is a curse laid on people like you, Bobs. You never rest, you never lose yourself—even in love. Already you are glancing at

that clock of mine and you haven't been here two minutes."

"It's because I have Radcliffe downstairs—I promised to come back."

"Your young giant? They talk of nothing else here."

"What do they say?"

"Everything. Some say he is Jito's master. Some say that Jito is waiting for a chance to tear your American apart. They say too he is in love with Adela Morales." She stopped, with a cigarette half-way to her lips. "That might be fatal."

Bob nodded. He raised one of those long white hands to his lips. "All the secrets of the border come to you, little Ann, sooner or later."

She looked about her at the heavily draped room. "Always secrets. There are times when every man will talk to a woman of the thing nearest him, and so I learn. I think the very ghosts of secrets must cling about every corner of this room, and behind every tapestry. Most of them are sad little unimportant secrets, but some of them have the power to wreck human lives. And all these tales that men bring me are at the disposal of this imperious Don Bob. Not," she added, "because I care a damn about his border crusade—I merely happen to love him."

Suddenly she laughed. "Last night that young Mexican captain of cavalry was downstairs. It is he who tells me their plans against you. All next week they are to wait in force along the Verdi road down by the mesa. He was still very angry because the major let that peon escape."

Bob smiled. "The major didn't. I came back and released him." His eyes grew thoughtful. "So they're going to hunt along the Verdi road. When Manuel comes tomorrow, get him word for the band to keep back in the foothills. Tell him that on Thursday I lead them in a raid." Bob turned toward the girl and smiled gravely down at her. "If you only knew how indispensable you are in every way." His hand touched her shoulder. "And how desirable."

The woman's body thrilled a little at his touch, and a mist played before her eyes. "What I tell is nothing. You know I would do anything for you."

The man said nothing, but walked across to the dressing table and took one of her long cigarettes. He stretched out comfortably on her chaise lounge.

"Have you ever heard of any piece of land owned in the name of Radcliffe?"

She shook her head.

"Probably it doesn't exist, but Ted thinks his father bought land here in the old days. He has sent back East for maps and records. In the meantime, keep those pretty ears open." He smiled. "You know, of course, that Blount's men are still after me?"

Ann Reed laughed. "That must give you grave concern."

"It has elements of danger. One of them is that any traitors in my band would be more likely to give information to Blount than they would to the Mexican soldiers. They have greater confidence in Blount's ability to protect them, and they know that if he promises a reward he will pay. The major has let it

out that someone in the band already feels the itch for Morales's gold. He may know much or little. He may be able to ruin me. Tell Manuel what I have said—have him send anyone he may suspect to me." Bob smiled reflectively. "I should not like to kill this dog without good cause. But neither can I wait until it is too late."

"And if you find him?"

"My dear, what could I do? This is not work for sentimentalists. For two years I have existed because I strike first. That is a fundamental rule of warfare, and this is border warfare, so when I must I am a killer. Does that disturb you, my dear?"

There came again to the girl that look of submission and utter yielding to this man.

"How little you know women. Nothing you do disturbs me. To me your little finger is worth more than the life of all your band, for I find you in every way perfect."

Bob rose and, walking to where she stood, took her face in his hands. For a long time he looked down into her great black eyes. Then at last he shook his head. "You make me wonder, Ann, why all this loveliness and youth of yours should find me in any way desirable, and you make me wonder, too, what all this loveliness and youth of yours is ultimately destined for."

Ann laughed. "Old, old man," she mocked.

"Old enough."

"One is never old if one loves. That is your tragedy, Bob, you have never really loved. If you could give

yourself as I give myself, freely, happily, and utterly, you would never be old. Why have you never loved, really?"

The man patted her cheek and for answer lighted another cigarette. "When you were about five years old, I had already learned a little about this thing called love. The girl who taught me that dangerous wisdom decided at last that there were better men in the world than I. So she chose a better one. And since then, little Ann, life has never seemed a very important or vital business, except in the game I am playing now. That may be why I can't seem to fall in love."

He smoked for a time. "Love, I think, has come to this Radcliffe boy, and that way danger lies. Morales suspects it. Jito suspects. Once they are certain—or once they believe Adela cares for him,"—Bob shrugged his shoulders—"Morales will issue orders."

"Does your giant foreman know you are El Coyote?"

"I never want him to know. What I do is my own affair. I can't drag him into it. The kid has had a hard enough road since he came here. I want him to go on as foreman for Don Bob—whatever comes."

"But he must know sometime, Bob."

"When it is all over."

"And that will be?"

"Soon. One way or another it will all be over soon. Either I win or I lose. I think the border is ready to declare itself and follow me. Already I am planning to strike—one success and all the country will follow us. And if we fail—"

"Yes?"

"Then I shall kidnap Mendoza's star singer and take her to some tropical island where there are no bandits or pesos or tyranny, except the tyranny of love."

Submissively she laid her dark head on his arm. "And I could have you all to myself," she murmured. "Bob, I am so tired of the struggles of men and their hates and secrets. What does it matter about these peons, whether they are free or slaves? Always something is telling me all this is so vain—and it is only love that matters."

Bob smiled. He looked down at her with a vast tenderness. "Ann," he told her, "I sometimes suspect you of sentiment. Now I must go. Tell Manuel to be watchful." He raised her long, delicate fingers. "Again I put my life in these pretty white hands."

"And if these pretty white hands should betray you?"

He shrugged. "I should say that too would be part of the great game. Yet even then it would sadden me to destroy this lovely body of yours, for I am really very fond of you."

"I wonder," she questioned. "I wonder if you are really fond of anyone."

From the open door Don Bob smiled back. "There are one or two people I have a great weakness for, Ann *mia*, and you are the loveliest of them all."

For a long time after the door had closed, the girl sat staring into the mirror before her. At last she smiled, and once again she touched those lips of hers with deepest carmine.

CHAPTER XXI

AS summer gave way to autumn, the whole border about Verdi found itself girding for war. News of approaching revolution from Mexico City added to the unrest. All knew that if the Mexican government should fall, or find its own hands filled with revolution, Morales would have to depend on his own vaqueros alone. So both sides made ready, quietly but steadily, and men rode the Mexican ranges cautiously, not knowing friend from foe.

From time to time the war department prodded the little major to see that he would not slacken in his pursuit of El Coyote. And although Blount hunted early and late, following every vagrant clue, he had only the memory of long, futile pursuits through the sun-baked desert as a reward for all his efforts. Aunt Clara was the chief beneficiary.

"It's doing the major a world of good," she said more than once, to his discomfort. "The dear man's figure is absolutely seductive, and his digestion is strong as an ostrich's again. These little games of hide-and-seek are making a new man of him. I wonder if El Coyote knows he's being chased? It has never interfered with his activities."

But, as a matter of fact, it had.

Don Bob, throughout that torrid summer, had spent long days back in the Mexican hills, laying his plans, keeping his band scattered in little groups that dared meet only for an occasional raid and a quick retreat to the hills again.

One morning in late winter found Ted with old Manuel, driving a herd of cattle to water on the Mexican side. Manuel jogged tirelessly along on his thin pony, shouting at the straggling cattle, swearing fine Spanish oaths as the clouds of choking dust drifted upward and enveloped them. At last he pointed before him.

"Down there it is, Señor Ted. Beyond that arroyo is the waterhole. Let us rest there now, and by evening we shall make the higher country where grass is better."

Already the cattle had caught the scent of water and lumbered down the long, dry slope, stopping only when they stood knee-deep in the shallow, muddy pond. The men watered their horses. Ted's mouth and throat were parched. His canteen was empty, but he viewed the yellow, stagnant water before him distastefully.

"Let's ride up the arroyo," he suggested. "We may find a spring at the head of it."

Then for twenty minutes they trotted up the narrow bed of the stream, but found no trickle of water. Manuel shook his head.

"It is no good, señor. One may not look for living water in this land until the rains come."

Suddenly he stopped and peered anxiously behind him.

"Was it not a shot?" he asked.

Ted listened. Only the creak of saddle leather as the horse moved restlessly. He turned to speak, but this time unmistakably two shots sounded from the waterhole. Without a word both men pulled their horses about and spurred at a dead run down the arroyo.

Manuel was ahead by a length, and Ted saw him pull his thirty-eight from the holster and twirl the chamber. Ted's own automatic lay close against his side.

There where the arroyo widened into the waterhole, both men halted. Already they could see their cattle racing up the slope, driven by three Mexican vaqueros, yelling and shooting into the air. Down by the waterhole one steer lay kicking out his life. Nearly a half-mile distant five other vaqueros were driving another herd toward the waterhole. Ted's eyes blazed. The caution that Bob had urged so many times was forgotten. Drawing his automatic he fired after the vaqueros, and the bullet threw up the dust ahead of them. The men turned and came at a mad gallop straight for Ted.

"Don't shoot," warned Manuel quickly. "They will not shoot. These are Morales's men."

Ted rode forward, spurring his horse directly in the path of the leading Mexican. "Who shot that steer?" he demanded.

"I, señor," the leader answered, then he laughed insolently into Ted's face. "What will the big gringo do?"

Silently Ted put his automatic back in the holster. For a second he measured the distance, then lunged forward and struck the man full on the jaw. The vaquero swerved, and, as his horse plunged back, fell headlong.

Without another glance Ted turned his horse toward the approaching riders. Even from that distance he recognized Jito, the huge figure at their head. A sud-

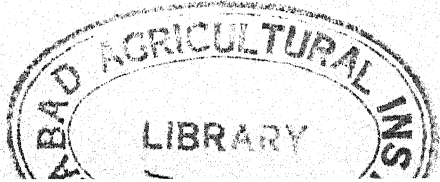
den wave of almost physical pleasure passed over the man at this prospect of coming to grips at last with the enemy. No one had ever dared use violence to any of Jito's vaqueros there in Mexico, where Morales's might was law. And the thought came to Ted, as he rode forward, that the man lying back there in the desert dust might be the one spark needed to set ablaze the long-smoldering enmity between those two. From that far-off day when Jito first seized his hand and looked disdainfully into his eyes—from that day both knew that sometime they must come to open conflict. They had known it, too, on that sunlit morning when Jito rode out to find Ted and Adela returning across the desert. Everyone had tried to keep them apart—Don Bob, Morales, Adela herself, but something written in the destinies of those two men willed it otherwise. And Ted, as he rode out to meet him, found it in his heart to be glad.

Jito had reined his horse to a walk, and as Ted drew up beside him the Mexican raised his sombrero in greeting.

Ignoring the gesture, Ted pointed angrily to his herd, scattered up the hillside beyond the waterhole, and to where one of his steers lay dead.

"Who ordered your men to stampede those steers away from water and to shoot into them?" Ted demanded.

"I did." Leisurely the Mexican curled his leg about the saddle-horn and rolled a cigarette. He held out the bag and brown papers to Ted. "Will you join me?" he asked.



"Is that waterhole yours?"

"In a sense, señor, it is. At least no one else owns it, and Morales's cattle have used it for many years."

"They have used it because no one else dared. We choose also to use it."

"Señor, it may be you forget you are in Mexico. Here Paco Morales makes his own rights. If we allow every wandering herd to use the waterholes near my uncle's ranch, it would take many vaqueros to keep them from using too his grassland. Besides, we need this water. But, to be truthful, I did not know these cattle were Don Bob's, or I should not have molested them."

Ted listened silently. He could see that the big Mexican was making an effort to speak civilly—that for some reason he did not at that time seek open conflict.

"Let us put this thing on a clear basis," Ted answered. "Don Bob's herds are grazing on these lands. They are also using this waterhole because it is public property, neither yours nor mine. There is room here for both. We come seeking no quarrel, but if from now on I find anyone driving our cattle from water, I'll shoot and order my riders to shoot. Is that clear?"

Jito's face had darkened and the great cords of his neck swelled, but he chose to smile.

"Those are brave words, señor, especially when used to me. Almost I am tempted—but no. There should be no ill will between the men of Don Bob and of Morales. The man you knocked from the saddle—it was a very pretty blow—is well punished. I myself

shall make double payment for the steer he shot. *Esta bien?*" The big vaquero smiled.

There was something too friendly about him. Ted sensed an eagerness to get away—a suppressed air of anxiety about the man. More than once Jito looked back at his own herd, where Morales's steers, with the scent of water in the nostrils, were impatiently crowding nearer the waterhole. Even as they watched, a few cattle plunged past the vaqueros. Something vaguely familiar about them made Ted ride forward, and with a sudden start he recognized on the shoulder of each the brand of Don Bob.

Manuel caught sight of them at the same moment. Excitedly he called, "*Caramba*, these are of the herd that was stolen last spring!"

For a moment Jito's black eyes were murderous, then he smiled. "*Si*, your stolen herd is back there, señor. This morning my vaqueros came upon them abandoned. Tonight I intended to notify Don Bob that the cattle El Coyote had stolen are found again." He looked searchingly into Radcliffe's eyes, and it was only with an effort that Ted refrained from smiling his disbelief. Yet it was all so clear. Jito's men had driven them away that Verdi might believe El Coyote was at last raiding the Americans.

He looked at Jito. "Don Bob will be happy to know his steers are safe. In the meantime, I am driving my herd back to that waterhole. We will probably be there an hour. After that, your cattle are welcome."

Without a word he turned and rode down the slope. As he passed the fallen man, now seated in the sand,

the Mexican scowled up at him, but made no move. Quietly Ted rounded up his cattle.

Jito had not stirred. He sat his horse, brooding, watching the American with eyes that glowered beneath his sombrero.

"*Dios*," he muttered at last, "when will Don Paco give the word?"

CHAPTER XXII

FOR the next month Ted rode the southern range with Don Bob's cowboys. They were busy days. Days that Don Bob, with careful foresight, had made so full they gave Ted no chance either to think or to dream.

But as the weeks passed Bob seemed more preoccupied, more silent than before. He sat more often on the porch of the ranchhouse, sunk in thought, gazing out over the desert.

So it was Ted found him one morning in early spring.

"I heard a rider leaving. Thought it might be you," Radcliffe said.

Don Bob tapped a piece of paper in his hand. The gray eyes that looked out over the desert were narrowed to just a hair's breadth and the square jaw seemed a bit more grim.

"It's a message from the major." Bob waved the open letter. "A rather curious message, too, when you consider it carefully. There might seem to be a touch of subtle irony in it if one could suspect the major of being playful. Tell me what you make of it." And Don Bob tossed the note across the table and busied himself with a cigarette.

Ted read:

Important developments here will probably lead to the immediate capture of the bandit. Tonight

in my tent we will know his identity. I have asked Morales and Jito to be there. I should like you present, and bring Radcliffe also. This, of course, is confidential.

L. R. BLOUNT,
Major, 37th Cavalry.

Slowly Ted laid the letter down. His eyes grew questioning as they looked across the table, and after a moment Bob threw back his head and laughed.

"It's never well to take our major too seriously, old fellow," he cautioned. "This isn't the first time the capture of El Coyote has been just around the corner!"

"But what does it mean?"

"I haven't the least notion. I was thinking about it when you came out. Blount has come across a new clue. He may have captured some of El Coyote's band—although I think not. It may be Morales has learned something and that they're planning some sort of dramatics for the falling curtain of the drama. Many things might happen. But why the devil does he want me there? He knows I'm not in sympathy with Morales." Bob drummed for a while on the railing with his fingers. "At any rate, come with me tonight." He smiled and stretched lazily in the spring sunshine. "Life can be so damned interesting at times and so terribly dull at others. I'll have to remember both the major and Morales in my will. In their blundering way they've made this past year quite endurable," he added smiling.

But more than once during that long day Ted saw his friend sunk in puzzled contemplation. Later he was to look back and realize in admiration and sorrow the

black hosts of apprehension that already bore the man unwelcome company.

Yet at dinner Don Bob seemed in higher spirits than for many days. The exultation of danger was upon him, and the zest of life sang again in his veins. Boredom and half-contemptuous cynicism were gone. His was the complex character to whom the presence of danger is like wine. It made life, as he had said, "endurable." So over his coffee Don Bob hummed a cowboy ballad and, rising at last, put an extra clip of cartridges in his pocket and examined the automatic that lay within his shoulder holster. He smiled, while Ted looked on with watchful eyes, conscious of some vague impending danger.

"Let's go, old son," he said at last. Bob looked out into the sunset and drew in a deep breath of the warm desert air. For a moment his own eyes were wistful. "What is it," he asked slowly, "that keeps us from happiness when there is so much beauty in the world? If any God exists, He probably despises men as the most ungrateful of creatures. Come."

Many days later Ted was to remember those half-whispered words.

They turned south just before entering Verdi and struck out on a winding road that led, after many turns and twistings, toward the nearer foothills of Mexico.

"The major has moved camp," Bob said, as they drove through the night. "We can drive within a few miles of it, and I've asked him to send horses to meet us there."

Once during that ride Ted turned and asked, "Bob, are you expecting something to go wrong?"

But the other only smiled and urged the low roadster to greater speed. "What could go wrong on such a perfect evening?" he asked.

It was dark when they drove up at the road's end. A soldier waited with two horses already saddled, and in half an hour more they arrived at the cavalry camp.

Everything was a picture of military precision. The major, all Verdi knew, prided himself upon orderliness. Nearly a hundred little tents had been pitched in neat rows at a spot where stunted trees told of a waterhole. The site was cleared of cactus and mesquite. A half-dozen mess tables, scoured and shining, stood at the farther end. Horses dozed in a wide corral, and beside a campfire soldiers lounged. As Don Bob approached, his eyebrows rose in a little gesture of surprise, for in the glare of the firelight he could make out dimly a ring of armed cavalymen riding patrol about the camp. He smiled across at Ted.

"I'm just wondering whether that patrol is to keep people in or keep people out." Then he spurred forward without waiting for a reply.

Toward the south end of the camp three large tents were pitched, and before these the major waited. The old soldier was in high spirits.

"Glad to see you, delighted to see you, boys. Morales and Jito are already here. Come in."

As they dismounted, he slapped Don Bob with his pudgy hand.

"Big news, Bob, my boy! After tonight you will take back your dismal prophecies that we'll never capture the Coyote."

"You haven't got him already, have you, major?" Bob asked.

"Just as good as got him. What will you wager we don't capture him this very night?" He turned and looked eagerly up.

"Oh, as to that," Bob answered, "I'd be willing to wager my life."

In the flickering lamplight Ted saw the gaunt figure of Morales within the tent. Jito, farther back at the table, was poring over a typewritten paper. They rose at the entrance of the Americans. Morales came forward and shook Bob's hand heartily.

"A happy occasion, señor, no? Tonight the major assures us we will know who El Coyote is, and once known"—he slipped a long finger across his neck—"there is no more El Coyote. And now you are asking yourself why the major invites you, remembering how you always defended this bandit?"

"Have I defended the bandit, or have I rather condemned a condition that forces one to be either a bandit or a slave?"

"Are you a slave, señor?" Ted felt the touch of steel beneath the question, but Don Bob only laughed.

"Assuredly not, *amigo*. But perhaps I too am a bandit." And in the lamplight Ted saw Morales's teeth gleam with a smile.

"In any case, señor, I asked the major to invite you because I am sure El Coyote is an American, and it is well to have here a leading American rancher when we learn who this bandit is. And now perhaps the major will tell us his story."

Blount waved them all to chairs, and the men gathered silently about the little wooden table—all except Jito, who still stood aloof, like some brooding statue.

"Shan't keep you people in suspense a minute longer," began the brisk little man of war. "The whole story boils down to this: Two things have been needed to persuade these people to talk—money and absolute protection. Everyone's afraid to open their lips—and with good reason. A week ago Morales, here, doubled the money leading to the capture of the Coyote. I've promised to protect anyone giving information if I have to delegate a squadron of cavalry.

"Well, that sort of bait is having its effect. I've had nibbles, and a week ago I had a real bite. I think I can tell you that tonight at this tent, and within half an hour, one of El Coyote's trusted lieutenants comes to tell us who El Coyote is and where he may be found."

"How do you know the man actually is a lieutenant of El Coyote?" Morales asked.

"He says so, in full knowledge that he is putting himself in our hands, and that if his news is false he will languish uncomfortably in a Federal jail for some time. Anyone who brings us false leads is going to suffer. But I don't think this man wants to mislead us. In fact, not until I promised him protection out of this country would he even tell me who he was. And I learn that he is trusted by the bandit for the good reason that once El Coyote saved his life."

"The dirty dog," Ted growled, and instantly regretted it.

Morales raised his shoulders in deprecation. "Oh, as

to that—" Then, dismissing the interruption, he asked, "Do we know this man?"

"He calls himself Antonio Ortega."

Don Bob moved ever so slightly in his chair. "A short, stocky chap with a scar over his eye?" he asked.

For the first time Jito spoke. "I gave him that scar," he muttered. "It lies above his right eye."

The major nodded. "That's the fellow. A villainous sort of ruffian. Last week he came here at night, half frightened to death. Told me he had a secret to sell. I felt like kicking him, but in this life one works with the tools one finds. I tried to get him to tell me then and there, but not he. Said in a week he would be ready to leave the country and that the night he told me I was to pay him the reward and escort him to the fort. Oh, the fellow was in a terrible funk. He must have loved money very much to dare this thing in the face of his fear. He was so rotten scared he jabbered, and perhaps you can't blame him. You all remember what happened to the last man who gave information." The major touched his chest. "Two shots through the throat and a handful of gold coins scattered over him to show El Coyote's contempt. I've had to promise this fellow military protection and a safe escort out of the country. By God, I'll see nothing happens to him. If anything did happen, we wouldn't be able to get another man to open his mouth if you offered him the Homestake Mine. So make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen, until nine-thirty. And then for El Coyote."

In silence the four men considered the major's tale. Blount himself walked restlessly up and down the tent.

Never before had he been so near his quarry. He buttoned and unbuttoned his coat. A few minutes more. Ted felt the tenseness. In the eyes of Morales glowed a fire of undying hate. He too was having difficulty in remaining calm. Cautiously Ted looked at Jito, but the big fellow stood apart, watching the shadows that rose and fell on the tent wall. An interminable silence.

At last Don Bob looked at his watch.

"Nothing to be done for twenty minutes. Think I'll go out and take a look about your camp, major. No, don't bother coming. I just want to stretch a bit." And smiling at Ted he passed out of the tent.

Thoughtfully Morales looked after him. "So at last Don Bob's romantic hero comes to the end of a bloody trail. It was bound to be. For how can one put trust in this scum of the border and hope to live? One offers money and nothing happens because men are afraid. One offers more money, and sooner or later comes a man whose greed for gold is greater than his fear of the Coyote's vengeance. So it is with this Antonio. For him rewards and protections are too good. I would learn what he knows and cut his throat."

"Except that I have promised him both reward and protection," the major reminded.

Morales's smile held an amused pity. "As you will. You Americans and your sentimental moralities! They amuse me, if I may say so without offense. You believe in keeping faith even with the faithless. An expensive gesture at times. But protect him, by all means, my major. *Qué va*, what we want is El Coyote."

In the talk neither Jito nor Ted took part, but stood on either side of the table, looking silently down.

Once Jito's glance fell on the young American, and he seemed again to be gauging him as an antagonist not unworthy of one's best skill. Again came to Ted that sense of inevitable conflict—of a coming time when these two would come face to face in a last encounter.

So the long minutes dragged by, and at length even Morales and the major fell silent, gazing with a kind of hypnotic attraction at the watch that lay on the table between them, awaiting the arrival of this unknown man who might clear up the mystery that for years had baffled the borderland.

A soft breeze, hot and dry from the desert, sighed through the tent, rippling the flap, causing those dark shadows to dance upon the farther wall. All eyes were now upon the watch. Its steady ticking droned on. Five minutes more.

Abruptly out of the night the sound of a shot closely followed by another ripped its way into the little group. Each man started to his feet. Loudly Blount called an orderly.

"Find out what that damned shooting's about." Perspiration had broken out on his face. "Ordinarily I wouldn't worry—but, by Gad, if anything goes wrong—"

Reaching in a canvas knapsack he buckled on his army automatic. Muttering with impatience he walked twice the length of the floor. A footfall sounded on the sand outside and a long shadow fell across the tent wall. Quickly the major raised the flap. In the moonlight stood Don Bob, rolling a cigarette. He nodded, and scratched a match on the tent pole.

"I just heard two shots, major." Bob inhaled the fragrant smoke deeply. "Do you suppose it could mean something's gone wrong with your information?"

Before the major could answer a little knot of soldiers approached, bearing a Mexican between them.

"He was shot just outside the line, sir," a corporal announced. "We heard two shots almost together, then somebody cursed in Spanish and this bird came running into us screaming. One shot got him. He's just about gone."

Blount looked closely at the man. He held the lamp nearer and a bitter curse rolled in his throat. "It's Antonio, by God! Put him in that chair. Get some brandy." He raised a futile hand aloft. "By God," he said helplessly. Roughly he shook the inert form.

"Who is *El Coyote*?"

The Mexican's glazing eyes opened and turned in terror toward the light. A rasping cough trembled in his throat. Desperately the major said to Morales; "Ask him in Spanish. Quick. The man is dying."

The Spaniard's face glowed with a dark fury. He glared at the Mexican. "*Quien es El Coyote?*" he hissed. "*Dígame, pronto, quien es?*"

Slowly the Mexican's head moved, his lips opened and his eyes roved about the little group. At last they rested on the face of Don Bob. A little convulsive quiver ran through the wounded man, his jaws dropped, and he slumped limply forward. The major's hand closed on the Mexican's pulse. No beat of life. It was over.

"Here's the brandy, sir," announced the orderly.

Mechanically the major reached for the glass and drained it. "By God," he cried savagely, and flung the glass to the ground. "So El Coyote gets him right out of my camp. Under my very eyes, surrounded by a squadron of cavalry." Bitterly he laughed. "Who will be fool enough to play traitor to El Coyote now?" Then slowly, very slowly, the little major pulled himself erect. For the moment all hope had died.

"Gentlemen," he said dully, "I invited you upon an empty errand. My apologies."

He looked toward the dead Mexican, where the lamplight, as if in high merriment, flickered now across those eternally silenced lips.

DON BOB leaned across the table, his eyes, thoughtful and moody, fixed on the crumpled figure of the Mexican.

"A minute more," he said half aloud, "a minute more and we might have learned so much." Lightly he touched the major's shoulder, then he reached for his hat. "Come," he said to Radcliffe, and abruptly left the tent.

Under escort of a sergeant they galloped out over the desert. As they reached the car Bob said, to Radcliffe's surprise, "You drive," and climbed heavily in.

Mechanically Ted took the wheel while his mind raced back to the unexpected tragedy of that past hour. Once more he seemed to hear those two hurried, spiteful shots in the darkness, and saw the look of fear and horror graven on the face of the Mexican. And for the first time it came to him how desperate a game was being played almost under his eyes.

"El Coyote must have surrounded the camp," Ted said at last. "The bandits must have seen us pass. And they were waiting for him outside the circle of cavalry."

Bob stirred uneasily. Ted felt the weight of the man's body against his own shoulder and saw Bob's head droop forward.

For a time they drove on through the night. Then, uneasy at the long silence, Ted asked, "Tired, Bob?"

No answer. The weight of the older man seemed heavier, and as again Ted looked down Bob's head

swayed limply forward with a little sigh. Jamming on the brakes Ted took the man's shoulders in his arms and raised him. The face was dead-white, but in a minute the gray eyes opened and the lips moved.

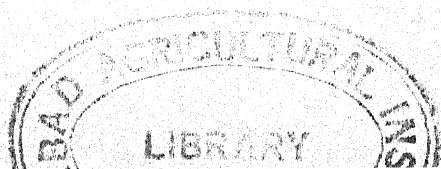
Very faintly Ted heard the words, "Punctured in the side. Take me out to the ranch." Again the eyes flickered. "Sorry," he whispered, and fainted.

For a brief moment in the silence of the starlit desert Ted sat very still, while one by one past memories crowded in on him, until at last they had formed themselves into an inescapable pattern. With the suddenness of a lightning bolt the truth burst. El Coyote!

Curiously, as if he were looking upon a stranger, Ted gazed down at this man who sat so quietly beside him. He felt his own heart pounding and a dull throbbing in his brain. El Coyote! The man all the border was seeking, the killer with a price upon his head. This man so loved and hated, praised and condemned, sat helpless beside him, and suddenly Ted realized that, bandit and killer, this man was the nearest friend he had in the world.

Very gently Ted started the car, then wrapped one huge arm about the limp figure. On that side the man's clothes were already wet with blood. Rapidly Ted sped through the night. Once he looked at his watch—a little after ten. There would be no one at the ranchhouse. The servants would be in their own quarters. Once the car struck a rut in the road, and the man groaned. Ted drove more cautiously, slowing down almost to a stop where the road was broken.

Once on the state highway, Ted shot the car at a mad



pace down the road. Mile posts flashed by. The lights of Verdi loomed up to the west, and skirting the town, Ted tore on to the ranch. The bars were down, and driving up to the house he stopped and switched off the lights. Raising the stricken man in his arms, Ted ran up the steps, pausing once to listen, but conscious only of the beating of his own heart. The servants had already gone.

Inside, with hasty, unaccustomed fingers, he cut away the coat and blood-stained shirt. The wound was no longer bleeding. The heart still beat, but very feebly. In desperation Ted looked about the room. A first-aid kit, he remembered, was in the medicine chest, and in a short time he had sterilized the dark jagged wound and fastened heavy bandages over it. He poured a little whisky between the man's lips, then waited, feeling horribly alone, terribly in need of aid.

As he stood there a faint flush came to Bob's cheeks, and for an instant he opened his eyes, then closed them.

Stooping forward, Ted caught the words. "You can trust the cook. And tell Ann—Ann at Mendoza's. But no doctor—remember, no doctor. You know why." Then again his face paled. Consciousness had left him.

Ted pulled a chair to the bedside. There was nothing to do but wait—and hope. Slowly the minutes of midnight ticked by, and the early hours of morning. Ever his eyes turned to the still form that breathed so slowly beneath the covers. More than once, like some physical chill it came over him how utterly alone was this man whose hand had been raised against the entrenched scheme of things. This man, he found himself

thinking, had doomed himself to the lone fight. He could turn nowhere. He could rely on no one. This man who held the border in terror, this last outpost against the domination of the strong, now lay helpless, suffering—perhaps done. And in all the borderland he could look nowhere for aid.

Before dawn Bob's face was burning. Quickly the fever mounted and he tossed restlessly, throwing the light blanket from the bed. Vainly Ted tried to soothe him. An hour later he lay in delirium, his voice rambling in a low monotone. Once Ted laid his hand on the man's hot forehead, and Bob's eyes for an instant opened.

"Tell Ann," he repeated.

In desperation Ted rose. Running to the servants' quarters, he tapped on the door of Bob's Mexican cook. She came, grumbling and sleepy, to the entrance.

"Your master," he whispered, "is wounded. No one must know. I go to bring help. Stay with him. Keep him in bed. You understand?"

The old woman crossed herself. "Si."

In two minutes she was shuffling up the steps to Bob's room and had replaced the blanket thrown on the floor.

With a wrinkled hand she gently touched him. "Mother of God how hot he is! Get help quickly, señor. Help, for the love of God!"

But Ted was already gone.

Mendoza's was at its height. Even from far off the blaze of lights blurred the horizon, and as Ted drew

up he heard a roar of applause from within and the tinkle of many glasses. Men's voices shouted a name he could not catch, but as he stepped within all noise had stilled.

A sudden hush had fallen, an expectant hush. The waiters about the crowded tables stood motionless in the smoke-filled room. All faces were turned toward the center of the patio where, in a ring of slowly changing lights, a girl was singing. Ted walked quietly to the nearest waiter.

"Where will I find Ann Reed?"

The man nodded to the patio. "It is she who sings, señor."

Slowly Ted drew closer. Just outside the light he stopped and watched her. She moved indolently in that circle of light, knowing herself to be the master of all their moods, feeling the power of her wizardry. The young, fresh voice seemed to come effortlessly from her throat. A low rejoicing voice, in strange contrast with the veiled sadness of her eyes. She held those quiet, attentive faces in a spell.

And when at last she stopped a tempest of bravos and applause shook the long, low room. She smiled and had turned toward the door when Ted reached her side.

"Señorita," he began.

The great black eyes looked up at him. "Yes?"

"I am Ted Radcliffe, the friend of Don Bob. It is important I talk with you now—at once."

Beneath the rouge her face went white, and with a little beckoning gesture she hurried down the hall.

On the stairs she turned toward him. "Tell me. He is hurt?"

"He is wounded. He wants you."

"Badly wounded?"

"Badly."

She choked back a sob. "Wait at the door. I won't change. I'll take some things along."

Within a minute she had returned, and in even less time they were in the car, leaving behind them a bitterly distracted Mendoza, who tore his black hair and called down curses on all undependable *cantadoras*.

Throughout that ride the girl sat quite still, her hands folded tightly in her lap, her face tense and drawn.

At Bob's door Ted raised his hand for silence. He looked in, and, seeing no change in the white, drawn face among the pillows, motioned the girl to enter. "I'll be out here if you need me," he told her.

She nodded gratefully. "I want to be a little while with him alone."

The door closed silently.

All through that dawn and sunrise and the hours of early morning Ted kept vigil outside the door, ceaselessly pacing the length of the hall harassed with fear. A dozen times he decided to bring Dr. Price, but always he held back, remembering the warning words of that stricken man beyond the door. What mistrust could Bob have of the bluff, plain-spoken doctor? Yet he had been so insistent. "No doctor," he had said, "no doctor."

By six o'clock Bob's delirium had not quieted. The

man was pitifully weak and in distress. The girl still crouched by the bed. She seemed strangely out of place in that low-cut spangled dress. Her black eyes were without hope.

"He hasn't known me," she whispered up at him. "Not once."

Ted looked once more into the man's agonized face, and made his decision.

"I'm going to bring Dr. Price."

"But—"

"I know. It puts Bob at his mercy. But if we don't get help, he'll die." Then after a moment he added slowly, "And Price won't tell."

"How can you be sure?"

Ted's big hands clenched. He looked down at the pale, unconscious figure beneath the bedclothes. This man was his friend, and now he lay helpless, perhaps dying. "I won't let him tell," Radcliffe answered quietly.

For the first time that day a sense of security came to the girl. She looked at the square, firm jaw and again the solace of his protection brought her comfort. This big, determined man before her was an ally.

Price was already up. Ted found the red-faced doctor chewing a cigar and sipping a steaming cup of coffee.

"Just got back from the Mexican quarter," he grumbled. "If they'd only have their babies at some white man's hour—" Then he stopped as he caught the tense, anxious look in Radcliffe's eyes.

"It's about Bob," Ted told him. "Bring whatever you need for a gun wound and come with me."

Hastily Price filled his satchel and followed the man to the car. "What's happened?"

"Bob was shot in the side. He has lost a lot of blood. He's delirious now."

"When was he shot?"

"Last night before midnight."

"What in hell did you wait till now for?"

Ted was silent. As they sped down the street Price pulled his hat low over his forehead.

"Just how did it happen?"

Ted's eyes were fixed on the winding road ahead. "I did it—accidentally." He felt grateful to Price for the silence that followed.

After a time the doctor asked, "Who is with Bob now?"

"A girl from over at Mendoza's. She knows a little about nursing."

Again silence. They drove up before the house.

Inside, Ann met them. She had changed her costume for a simple linen dress, and beyond a close glance and a nod, Price gave no sign of her presence.

For a long time he looked down on the bed. At last he called for warm water, and with Ted's help changed the bandages. Through it all Bob lay in a state of half-consciousness. Price darkened the room, then again sat in troubled silence watching the pale face. To Ted and the girl he spoke no word until they were on the porch outside.

"Well?" Ted forced himself to ask.

"*Quien sabe?* He may make it or he may not. But he's lost too much blood."

"Give him some of mine."

"I may this evening. If there is no change, we'll have a transfusion. In the meantime, keep him quiet, perfectly quiet."

Price turned to go, and at the bottom of the steps Ted stopped him.

"Dr. Price, I can't tell you why I'm asking it, but not a single soul must know of this. No one in the world but you. That is Bob's wish. I've got to count on you."

Before the doctor could answer an army car drove up to the gate and, walking forward, they found the major slapping dust from his uniform.

"Haven't a minute to stop," he called, "but I was just a little worried. This morning the sergeant found blood on the saddle Bob rode after that Mexican was shot."

Both men turned toward Ted. He forced himself to smile. "I remember. Bob tore his hand on a clump of mesquite as we rode along. I helped him tie a handkerchief around it when we got to the car."

Blount laughed. "I'm getting to be an old woman. But with men getting picked off right around your own tent— Oh, you haven't heard, Price, have you?" And the major, eager as always to be the bearer of news, told the doctor of the past night's encounter.

Ted watched Price's eyes tighten with suspicion, then harden into certainty. Once he glanced quickly up at Radcliffe.

"And so," Blount concluded, "nobody yet knows who the killer is."

With his foot Price traced an intricate pattern in the sand. "I wonder," he said at last, "I wonder if some of us couldn't make a fair guess."

The major looked up eagerly, then decided it was one of Price's jokes. He laughed. "Don't want guesses, doctor. I want facts. If you're going to town, Price, I'll give you a lift."

But the doctor had suddenly changed his mind. "Thanks," he said. "Ted and I have a few important things to say to each other within the next half-hour."

Turning on his heel, he made his way back to the house.

ON the porch Doctor Price sank into a chair and chewed for a time on his cigar while Ted sat silently on the top step looking across the sands. Dimly he knew the thoughts that were passing through the doctor's mind. He knew too where those thoughts at last must lead. There was no stopping that. He had taken a chance—and lost. The least he could do now was to insure the silence of this man. Tensely he sat and waited. At last he felt the doctor's eyes upon him. Ted looked up. Price's face was worn, the eyes troubled with this new, unwelcome knowledge. At last he spoke.

"I've half expected this. More than half. And yet it doesn't make the truth any sweeter." His voice came in a slow undertone, as if unwilling to frame the words. "So the trail of El Coyote leads here! Another of life's little comedies. Yesterday the unknown terror of the border. Today a helpless, wounded man."

"Not helpless, Dr. Price."

Price looked quickly up. Some new quality in Radcliffe's voice reached him. He understood. "Meaning he has you, Ted. Yes. I take that back about his being helpless. And yet, suppose someone talks—suppose I talk?" The doctor's words came as a direct challenge.

Ted's mouth was a straight line. "That man inside," he answered grimly, "is my friend. He was my father's friend, and when the whole world was pulled from beneath my feet he gave me a hand. He stood between me and—I'm not sure what. He was the only friend I

had in life. He still is." For a second Ted's voice trembled. "Well, the time has come when I can pay back a little of this friendship. For one thing, I can see him through now, and I can see that nobody learns from you or from anyone else who El Coyote is."

"That sounds," the doctor drawled, "just the least bit like a threat, Ted."

"It isn't meant to be if you're the man I think you are. When I decided to bring you out I had to decide that no matter what you learned you wouldn't talk. And I told myself that unless I had your promise of silence I'd hold you here, by force if I had to, until Bob gets better—or dies. I'll hold you until he is safe, one way or another. There aren't many things I won't do to keep his secret."

For a long minute the doctor looked into the man's eyes. There was no mistaking the message. At last he rose and laid his hand on Ted's shoulder. "It was a lucky day for Bob when you came along, boy. Without you he'd be done already. As for me, you needn't lose a wink. That man inside is my friend, too. So, in the meantime, we'd better both tell the world Bob's out on the range until he gets better, or—"

Silence. A long uncertain silence followed the words, while a heavy hand seemed lifted from the man's heart. The leaves of the eucalyptus trees rustled and the hot desert wind played in upon them. From the open door came the sound of a girl's muffled weeping.

Price looked up. "She's safe, I suppose?"

"Bob told me to get her before he passed out."

The doctor nodded and rose. His understanding eyes

were for the moment troubled at the strangeness of it all. He shook his head.

"How little we know anyone—even ourselves. For fifteen years I've known Bob. I've hunted with him, ridden with him." He smiled a reminiscent, wistful smile. "Once in a desert hut he even helped me bring a baby into the world. I thought I knew that quiet man, but I only knew one side of him, and probably the least important side. He might have been a great patriot or a great martyr in other times or lands. He had the supreme gift of sacrifice—and it's brought him to this." He turned down the steps. "I'll run your car in to Verdi and come out tonight. If things get worse—phone."

And then again that half-smile came to the man's face. "Funny," he said, then added, "You may be interested to know that in the eyes of the law you and I are both criminals now." He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Well, what the law thinks won't drive me to morphin. In fifty years I've learned enough to blast half the reputations in Verdi."

He smiled. "It's a very wicked world, Ted. When you reach my age you'll realize it. In the meantime, keep Bob quiet."

Again the silence of that desert morning fell about the hacienda. Once Ted looked into the room where Bob lay either unconscious or asleep. Beside him sat the girl, her eyes fastened on the pale face among the pillows. He listened for a long time to the slow, faint breathing, then left the room and paced the porch for an hour when the girl joined him.

Lighting a cigarette she inhaled eagerly. "I've been

afraid to smoke in there." Her face was white and worn, and with a pang of remorse Ted remembered that she had been with Bob through the long night and morning.

"Better get some sleep," he told her. "I'll stay with Bob until Price comes back."

She shook her head. "What's the use? I couldn't sleep. I couldn't bear to be alone now. Talk to me." She sat down beside him on the steps. "Has Bob a chance—I mean an honest-to-God chance?"

"Price thinks so."

"Who shot Bob?"

Ted told her all he knew of the past night. "Bob and the Mexican must have seen each other and fired almost together."

"And the Mexican?"

"Dead."

"Then there is no one to know?"

Radcliffe shook his head slowly. "Morales may suspect."

Again the girl's eyes drooped, and he added: "Don't you think you'd better lie down? There may be a hard night ahead for us both."

"But what will the end be?"

"I wish I knew. If Bob gets better it means war until either he or Morales wins. The whole border will be brought in, for those two men are raising a storm that will sweep the country."

"Will it bring you into the fight?"

"Bob was my friend—whether he lives or dies my hand is against his enemies."

She rose, then suddenly swayed forward. Ted caught

her and carried her into the house. Quietly he laid her down on his bed. She looked up at him and whispered, "I'm so tired and afraid for Bob—and everything."

Radcliffe nodded. "I know. It will all come out right. I'll call you if there's any need."

Outside he resumed his lonely vigil. Twice the phone rang, and each time he said that Bob was riding the southern range and would not be back for several days. Once during the afternoon he thought of the girl inside, wondering what part she might play in the hidden life of his friend. She seemed a strange blending of tenderness and almost brittle hardness. She was like someone living beyond both happiness and unhappiness. And once he remembered her eyes as she looked at Bob.

At last he forced himself to think of other things. Hours passed. Toward dusk the cook brought him a tray of sandwiches, and suddenly he recalled that neither the girl nor he had eaten all that day.

He carried the tray inside and, seeing the door open, tiptoed to where the girl lay sleeping, one arm curled beneath her head. She seemed quite untroubled, sleeping there as if for the moment life had ceased to be that stern antagonist against which she stood ever on guard. At the slight sound of his coming, she opened her eyes, and again those eyes were guarded and alert.

In the dusk they ate and smoked, and either the cigarettes or the strong tea allayed the fears of that interminable day. They began talking in low tones.

"He's quieter," Ted told her. "I think his fever's broken. That may be a good sign."

She nodded.

"Will you go back to Mendoza's tonight?"

"I should, but until Bob's better I won't. Damn Mendoza's," she added sullenly.

He was silent, not knowing what to say. There seemed so very little to say to this impassive girl, always so far away, always a little apart from everything except that figure in the darkened room.

Then, to his surprise, she began talking about herself. "I couldn't go to Mendoza's and have anything happen while I was gone," she told him in the voice that seemed at times like low-toned music. "But nothing could happen, could it?"

Unable to answer, Ted shook his head.

"If it does—" She broke off. "He was the gentlest soul I ever knew."

"It was for you he asked first of all."

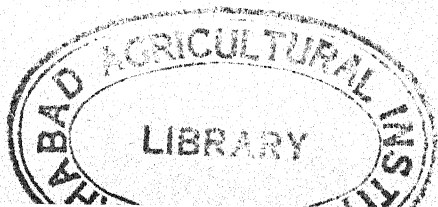
She smiled and a faint color came again to her cheeks. "You're good to say that. But I'd made him promise to do it long ago."

"You knew who he was long ago?"

"For more than two years. It is to me his leaders come for their orders, and it is to me they give their information. There are few things taking place on the border that don't get whispered at Mendoza's. And all those things sooner or later reach Don Bob."

"But why?"

"Why do I do it?" She looked squarely into his eyes. "I don't want you to be in the dark about me. We must be friends, you and I. I've loved more men than one, but none like Bob. I've seen a good deal of life,



and I've got a few of its knocks, and I'm probably every bit as old as you, so you won't think I'm just an irresponsible kid. And I do it just because I love him."

"Bob is a lucky man."

"I don't know. Nobody can get across to him. Bob's life is somewhere in the past. He's got two things that are real to him—his memories and his fight against Morales." As if the name brought up some recollection, she frowned, then added, "I can tell you something about yourself and Morales too—something helpful, maybe, but not now." And soon she went to Bob's room and closed the door.

Price, when he came that evening, seemed more cheerful. Bob's temperature was nearly normal. He was quieter, and after watching him for a time, the doctor took a sample of Ted's blood.

"Lucky," he murmured. "We need to be lucky, don't we? You see, your blood happens to be the same type as Bob's."

Within an hour he had completed a transfusion. "I think," he said, "tomorrow will see an improvement. Give him a teaspoonful of brandy in the morning before I come." He looked at Ted. "You'll probably be able to sleep without trouble tonight yourself. I'm going to stay here until midnight, so you can both get some rest. Then you"—he nodded toward the girl—"better sit up."

And whether it was the loss of blood or the loss of sleep, Ted did not open his eyes until the bright sunlight of the next morning was pouring in on him.

He hurried into Bob's room. The girl was still sitting

by the bed. As he entered she smiled, the happiest smile he had yet seen on her white face.

"He woke up once and knew me. I leaned over and kissed him and he fell asleep again. He's been sleeping ever since. I haven't dared stir. And I'm too stiff to move."

Ted put his arms about her and raised her. "It's bed for you, little girl," he said, and obediently she left him.

Remembering Price's words, Ted poured a few drops of brandy between the man's lips. His face was cooler. The deathly pallor had gone. For a time Ted waited, then walked to the window. At last, conscious of eyes upon him, he turned toward the bed, and with a wild thrill of joy, found the gray eyes of Don Bob open and the lips faintly smiling.

"Thank God!" The words burst from him.

Bob moistened his lips. "Something tells me," he said in a weak whisper, "you've been feeding the patient brandy." He motioned the boy nearer. "Did anyone see us that night?"

"Not one."

"Good."

"But you're not to talk," Ted warned.

"Oh, the devil I'm not." And a moment later Bob had fallen asleep. But it was not until two days afterward that Price pronounced Bob out of danger.

"And it's only because of those two kids," the gruff old fellow had told him, "that your homely, grinning self is still with us."

For a time the doctor hesitated, then blurted out at

last, "Give it up, Bob. You can't buck all the powers of northern Mexico. As for Morales, the man has a crack in his brain that will never let him change."

Weakly, Bob smiled up, but the old, unquenchable fire glowed in his gray eyes. "I couldn't give it up—I wouldn't know how to give it up. These people out there are looking to me to save them—to make free men of them. When I've done that, I'll give it up—not before."

Price nodded. "You know what I think. I think you're one of destiny's pawns. I think both you and Morales stand for forces in the world that must always be at war. The forces of despotism and freedom. And you can't help being enemies any more than a rattler and a bull snake. Well, I suppose my job is to nurse you back into shape until you can get hell shot out of you again. Meanwhile, I'm telling everyone that you're enjoying a strained back. See you tomorrow."

That night and each following night a rider came to Bob's window and sat there silently in the starlight until Ted came outside. Always the same grizzled Mexican, and always he asked the same question.

"*El señor?*"

And each night Ted answered, "*Bueno,*" wondering as the man rode away by what telepathy he had known of Bob's danger.

So for a week Ted took full charge on Bob's ranch, riding the range, working out with the cowboys, herding the cattle on both sides of the border line. One evening as he came back dusty and tired, Bob looked up at him with an affectionate smile.

"Remember I once told you I needed you more than you did me?" he asked. "Without you, old fellow, I'd be lost in every way."

And it was that same evening he talked for the first time of the night that for him had so nearly been the end of all things.

It was a moment both had dreaded and postponed. Yet both men knew that the secret of El Coyote had to be faced. Not for always could they share such knowledge in silence, and so, as Bob lay on his pillow that night in early spring, he considered for a while how best to begin. They were alone, for the girl had returned to Mendoza's.

Bob asked for a cigarette, and after a puff shook his head. "Tastes just like an inner tube," he complained, and Ted laid it aside.

Bob watched the blue smoke curl upward on the quiet air.

"I suppose," he said at length, "you'd like to know just what happened outside the major's tent that memorable evening?" For a moment he frowned in reminiscence. "A devilish close squeak. I'll never be a really successful bad man until I lose all faith in humans. Almost I have, but not quite—not enough. And it may get me some time. That beast Antonio was selling my life to Blount. I never suspected the fellow. Not once. I had saved his skin only two years ago, with some little danger and effort. He was very grateful then, and he swore with many fine Spanish oaths he would serve me always. For two years he did serve me. And then,"—Bob stirred restlessly—"then, I suppose, came the

old itch for gold. It was too strong for that peon whose hide I had preserved. But let that go." Bob's lips narrowed.

"When Blount told us the man's name it gave me a hint as to the direction Antonio might be coming from. That, too, was a long chance. It was an evening of long chances. Almost I was too late. When I went outside I hurried toward the troopers' line. In the darkness it was easy to slip through, but it wasn't a minute before I heard a horseman coming from the south. I couldn't be sure it was Antonio until he was upon me. I think he recognized me first. He must have been carrying his revolver ready, in the saddle. At any rate, he fired a second ahead of me, and I dropped him from his horse. Then I turned, ran back, and sauntered into the major's tent with a stinging pain in my side and a curiosity as to how long I could stand."

For a time they sat in silence, then at last Bob asked, "Was it a shock, old fellow, when you learned I was El Coyote?"

"I must have been too busy thinking how to get you home—the rest didn't seem to make much difference. And yet"—Ted hesitated—"now that I do know, how did it all come about?"

Bob's face, still gaunt and wasted, turned toward the window. At length, in that low, languid voice, he began. "To tell how Don Bob became El Coyote—I wonder if I know myself. It's all part of a tale that goes to make up the strange thing we call a man's life. And that tale, no matter how hard we try, must always remain a secret between ourselves and whatever God

exists. I think, Ted, some of us are born rebels and some are made rebels by that old stepmother Life. To me it may have come in both those ways. But always, from the very first, that old stepmother has cuffed me about. Well, it may have done me good. Certainly it made me take on a kind of armor. It made me hard, too. Perhaps too hard. And yet I loved life."

Outside the night wind rustled among the tall eucalyptuses. Flames crackled in the fireplace across the room. Bob's gray eyes had grown tender with the memories of days and faces long past.

"Years ago," the soft voice went on, "your father took from me the one woman I ever cared for. That was your mother. She was right when she chose your father; I never questioned that. He was a better man, and so he took her, as he took all things, but since that far-off day life has never seemed the serious, heroic business I had dreamed it. Life ceased to have any high importance from that time on.

"I came out here. I expected perhaps to find a kind of Garden of Eden, where men lived on a wider, cleaner stage, and I found a land more lovely than any I had ever known. A land of sunshine and great beauty and over it a cloud of human servitude. I found a people struggling against slavery. And seeing all those things—I was very young then, Ted—it seemed to me that the game could be played to still another tune, and it seemed a thing well worth trying. To see if one, by stepping outside the law, could not break the bonds that were holding a whole people in slavery and poverty.

"So I bought this ranch very cheaply, for everyone

thought I would be bled dry within two years by the big fellows like Morales. The first year my law-abiding enemies took away a waterhole that was mine, and two hundred cattle died. Before the year was out, five hundred cattle had been stolen from those same gentlemen and sold at a good price across the pass. I kept very exact accounts in those days, and, as they robbed me in one way I took from them in another. One year, in an effort to force me out, they had all of my cattle refused for shipment. A month later their paymaster was held up and six thousand dollars taken from him. That more than balanced the little matter.

"Meanwhile, I was awakening the Mexican peon. This world offered him nothing, but I did. I offered him manhood. I raised up his eyes. I taught him to clench his hands into fists. All these things meant the passing of years, while I worked through men I trusted, and as in the making of all omelets, some eggs had to be broken. There is blood on my hands. I am not a sentimentalist. When I must I am a killer. Disloyalty and cruelty I will not tolerate. I cannot help it even if I would. Meanwhile, as the world goes, I have prospered."

Bob's eyes fixed on the flickering fire. At last he shook his head. "Times change, old son. It isn't likely that El Coyote can stand out against the military of both nations. But whatever happens, I know this. I will have loosened the yoke on the neck of the small rancher across the line, and, when I pass, men can say that in the long list of rustling, raiding, and killing that can be laid at my door, not once have I sided with

the strong against the weak. Not by one hair's breadth have I ridden from the course I believe to be right."

Again the low voice stopped and the flare of a match lighted up his thin features. His eyes twinkled, and the half-mocking, half-wistful smile crept back to his face.

"Meanwhile, my services as a trouble-maker have been flatteringly appraised at fifty thousand dollars gold, alive or dead—preferably dead.

"The last battle of all is still ahead. For a long time I have decided that El Coyote must go. But before that I'm going to show the border country that the reign of the cattle king is over. If I can make the border blaze with revolt and see men hold their herds and haciendas in defiance of all Morales's vaqueros, it will be something worth living for. But it's not your fight, and I'm not going to have you take part in it. You'll have job enough running these ranches of mine while I'm away and keeping Jito on his own side of the fence. Now I'm tired of talking, and I'd like some broth, or whatever it is you feed to wounded bad men."

As Ted rose, Bob added, in quiet decision, "And tomorrow morning I get up."

THAT same bright morning Mendoza, *patron* of the glittering palace of dance, was standing very submissively before a limousine drawn up outside his patio. Mendoza's black eyes glistened with excitement. Not for months, he was exclaiming in voluble Spanish, had he been so honored as now. Never before dared he even hope that Señor Paco Morales might pay a visit to his unworthy place. But he was desolate that the señor had come in the morning, for now all was silent; yet if he would do him the favor—would he not take a glass of Spanish wine to refresh him?

Morales listened noncommittally to the fellow's talk, while his eyes passed leisurely over the low, adobe building that, like some gigantic candle of the desert, brought human moths of both countries to its nightly allure. At last Morales raised his hand and Mendoza froze to respectful silence.

"You have here, I am told, many beautiful women, no?"

The little innkeeper's eyes took on a cunning, knowing look. Now they were getting somewhere. Now, he assured himself, the old fox talked business. He raised his hands in a wide gesture. "Señor, there are women here who would make the great saints weary of paradise. I have here the beauty of many nations. For the dance there is a girl from the boulevards of Paris, a girl, you conceive, who has just come to my *palacio*. Her little foot—"

"Let us not spend this delightful morning talking of a woman's foot. Especially the foot of a woman who does not interest me."

Again Mendoza sank into a despairing silence. These lords of the land, they were so difficult, *qué va*, yet one must somehow please them.

Meanwhile the low, incisive voice went on.

"I am interested in a woman here who sings. They call her Ann."

"*Si, si*. The American. Her real name—"

"Why should we seek real names? The name I speak serves. I want to see this woman—now."

"I shall tell her you are here, señor. Yet it is, you understand, quite early. She may not be up, for she sings until early dawn. If you will wait but a *momentito*, señor."

And scarcely more than a moment later Mendoza returned. "The señorita will receive you within ten minutes. Meanwhile accept this glass of wine, *es un favor*," he lisped the old Spanish courtesy.

Leisurely Morales sipped his wine and considered things in which Mendoza had no part. At the end of ten minutes Mendoza led him upstairs and down the darkened hallway to a closed door. There, with a nod the Spaniard dismissed his guide. He knocked softly and the door opened. A woman in a jade kimono stood before him.

It may have been the velvet blackness of her hair, or the marble whiteness of her neck, or again it may have been the two great black eyes that looked incuriously into his. Whatever the cause, the tall Spaniard's own

eyes brightened with pleasure for a brief second, then very formally he bowed.

"I am Paco Morales."

"Come in, señor."

He noticed with an artist's satisfaction how low and full the voice was. He watched her walk to the chaise longue and curl up comfortably, and noticed with a little smile the jade slippers and the bare, slender ankles. At last he seated himself near the window.

"Perhaps," Morales suggested, "you have heard of me?"

She smiled. "Who has not?" She watched him for a while with those calm eyes that to him seemed veiled either in sadness or weariness. "They even tell me men fear you, Señor Morales."

"Men, yes—and some women."

"I wonder why?" Again their eyes fenced.

"It may be they have sufficient reason. But never a beautiful woman—as you are," he added. "May I smoke?"

She held the match for him, then asked, "I am wondering if you came here so early just to tell me that?"

"By no means. It has been long since I first sent you word asking if I might come, and it has been some weeks since you wrote me that I might. Many things have prevented. But chiefly I wished to learn about you before I trusted you too far. Today I come early that I may find you alone, and my reason for coming at all is to ask you certain questions. I expect to pay for the answers. I always pay. Both loyalty and disloyalty I pay, but in different coin. Señorita, you are intelli-

gent, so we can put aside formalities. I am a very powerful, a very rich man. You are a singer at Mendoza's. You do not always desire to remain among alkali and cactus. It may be you dream already of Paris, New York, or Vienna, but to make that dream come true one needs power and money, no?" He paused, and his cold eyes passed over her. "I could perhaps supply both."

"The señor is a lover of art?" Her words had just the faintest sub-tinkle of mockery.

"You mean that in jest, señorita, and yet, in a way of speaking, I am. But it is not art, or, if you will permit, it is not even my great admiration for you, that prompts this offer. You see, I can be practical, like you Americans."

Again the girl smiled. "Neither my voice nor my body. What else have I to offer?"

"Information and aid."

"What do you want to know?" She reached for a cigarette.

"Who is El Coyote?"

Her heart jumped, but the hand that held the cigarette never wavered. In contemplation she carefully blew out the match and laid it down. She nodded. "Yes, you would be willing to pay for that knowledge, wouldn't you?"

"*Seguro*. And rather handsomely."

"Is it true, then, as I have heard, that El Coyote might even destroy this power and wealth of yours?"

"It is conceivable. Why should I deny it? Meanwhile, he hampers me. He annoys me. He has killed some of my young men."

"And you think I know who he is?"

"I know nothing. I merely ask. At best I trust you may find out. You see, señorita, men come here who know many things. And these things men will tell when wine runs through their blood, and a pretty woman smiles in a certain manner and at a certain time. We know that members of the killer's band come here. Perhaps he too comes. *Bueno*. You are quite beautiful, you know the game of life, and if I myself, who have lived many years, am not insensible to your charm, ought it be difficult to get these desert rats to talk—if you choose?"

She seemed to consider. At last, "It might be done. Meanwhile, tell me what you know and what you suspect. Tell me everything that may help me. First, is he a Mexican, this Coyote?"

"I doubt it. I have fair reason to doubt it."

"Do you suspect who he is?"

"If I do, señorita, those suspicions could not help you greatly."

"Where is he most likely to be found?"

The Spaniard shrugged. "He may live out in the foothills and never come into Verdi. He may live in Verdi itself. He may"—and here a shadowy smile crept over the man's face—"he may, let us say, be a rancher living somewhere near Verdi."

It was as if a cold hand clutched her heart. "And if he is an American, what will you do?"

"I shall have him shot. His nationality—what difference? Certainly I shall never trust him to your slow, unpredictable Yankee justice, where anything might

happen." Paco Morales rose and walked the length of the room. "There is one thing more," he added, "and in this, too, I shall have need of you. With your beauty it should be an easy thing.

"There is a man staying with the rancher they call Don Bob. Hardly more than a boy he is, but very strong and very big, and, I regret to say, very attractive to your indiscriminating sex. His name is Señor Radcliffe. My niece, who knows little of men, is, I think, about to love this American. Only the good God knows the way of women. As for me, I should rather see her dead."

"Why?"

"Why? Because he is not of my world. He is not my choice. I could not die in peace knowing that all my fathers have built up should fall to his gringo hands."

His hands twitched as he lighted a cigarette. For a time the girl's eyes seemed to ponder what he had said. She frowned. "When one is so powerful as Paco Morales, what need is there to ask a woman to rid him of a lone man?"

Morales nodded. "Si. I, too, had thought of that. At any time within a day I could say the word that would cause Señor Radcliffe to disappear. But that would not kill my niece's love, and it is her love of him I hate—not this miserable boy. I want that she will turn again to the old Spanish ways and to me. I would have her hate him."

"And you want him entangled—with me." Her low voice had grown languid.

"Señorita, you are direct and, as I say, intelligent. I

leave you to set the stage. When you are ready I might even let my niece see with her own eyes what kind of man she cares for. It is not a new trap—but effective, no? And so much more subtle than killing.” Again he smiled. “Have I not said I, too, am an artist?”

“In the meantime”—he reached for his wallet and drew out five one-hundred-dollar bills—“this may make fast our alliance. And remember, this is nothing.”

He rose and his voice tightened with intensity. “Today an opportunity comes to you, señorita. Perhaps it comes but once. You have Paco Morales’s word that I shall give you twenty times this, and I shall say the word that will open doors to a career you may never have dreamed about. Here on the border I am well served, but at the present moment I have need of you. Do what I ask and you will never regret. They tell me you know the value of silence. It is a golden knowledge.”

He stood over her, watching the slanting sunlight that poured in through the window and touched her ivory shoulder and blue-black hair. Then, as before, his eyes brightened. For a moment they were the eyes of an artist, looking at some rarely beautiful handiwork. He bent down and his straight lips pressed the skin of her shoulder.

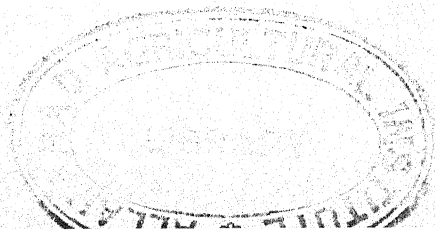
“Yes, you are very lovely.” His hand for a fugitive second rested on her hair. “Serve me and I may have still further gifts to offer you, for I should like to see that lovely body richly clad, and I should like to see you triumphant in this difficult world. Perhaps—who knows—you may be my last masterpiece, just as,

in their way, my niece and Jito are my masterpieces. But you are wiser, I think, than either of these."

At the door he bowed. "When you want me, send word, and I shall come. And one thing more—intelligent people do not play traitor to Paco Morales. Adios."

For a time, for a long time after his footsteps had died down the long hall, she sat in silent contemplation. The morning sun was burnishing the velvet blackness of her hair. Lightly she shrugged the jade kimono back from one white shoulder. She smiled into the half-closed eyes mirrored before her.

"Men are such fools," she told those calm, incurious eyes.



VERDI, hearing of Don Bob's strained back, had expressed polite regret, and went on busily with more important things.

Meanwhile, after a fretful week, Don Bob limped out to the porch and spent his time rolling cigarettes and gazing over the desert. Twice at sunset Manuel rode up and the two talked in undertones for an hour. And always after these half-whispered conversations, Don Bob remained silent and preoccupied.

So it was Adela and Aunt Clara found him toward the end of a sunny afternoon.

"Men," said Aunt Clara, singling out the most comfortable chair, "make such interesting invalids. They become really helplessly human at that time."

"Don't let your maternal instincts overcome you," Bob cautioned. "I'm well enough now to think about riding out to the range tomorrow. Ted's been carrying on the ranch single-handed. How's the major?"

"Very wrathy, but still playing the faithful bloodhound on El Coyote's trail. Always sniffing out impossible clues. Yesterday he brought in a lone sheep herder. Good Lord, even an army officer should have known the fellow couldn't have been a bandit chief. They frightened him out of eleven years' living, got no information, and finally realized they were up the wrong tree. When I suggested that they round up the waiters over at Mendoza's or stop the Pullman porters on their way through, the major got abusive. Told me he be-

lieved I didn't want the Coyote caught, and I admitted in my light-hearted fashion that I certainly didn't. After that, deep silence gathered about our family hearth. Today he has indigestion."

"Bob," asked Adela, "if El Coyote's cause is just, why does he plunder like a bandit?"

"He uses the best tools and methods he finds, like any other wise leader. If the law cannot uphold him in what he does, he must go outside the law. Don't forget that every great revolutionist was first a bandit. It is only when he wins that he becomes patriot and liberator. Here, where Morales is law, every enemy of his becomes an outlaw."

"That means, then, there will be open war?"

Bob nodded silently.

The major's wife was showing signs of impatience. "Nobody asks me for my opinion, and that's a great mistake, for here it is. The trouble with this border country is that it has too many saviors. Off and on, between transfers, I've been here thirty-five years. I know I don't look that old, thank you all very much. Well, every year I've spent here has been oversupplied with saviors of one kind or another. Morales thinks he's one; the government thinks it's one; perhaps El Coyote does. What they need, these people, is to be left alone. Give them peace from ideas. Drop it all! Let them cultivate their lands, herd their animals, and have their babies, although God knows they do very well in that last matter. But let them alone."

Bob smiled. "Dear lady, I think that is exactly what El Coyote would like to do—to see them left alone."

"But if he breaks Morales's power, will he let them alone, or will it be just an exchange of slave drivers?"

"I think in that event El Coyote would be well content to disappear."

"You're so conversant with his plans, if you weren't so lazy, I'd suspect you of being El Coyote."

Bob's amused eyes never changed. "I wonder just what kind of bad man I'd make. First of all I'd kidnap the major and hold him for ransom."

Aunt Clara gave her baritone chuckle. "Who do you think would ransom him? Me—after the atrocious bridge that man has foisted on me for thirty years? You tell your kidnaping band to come over any time, Bob. I'll leave the door unlocked. I'll even have the major's bag packed."

Bob looked at Adela. "This, young lady, should be a warning and a lesson. See to what depths the high passion of young love must come at last."

Adela smiled. "I'm terribly frightened, but I know that if anyone threatened the major, Aunt Clara would be the first to scratch."

"Hear, hear," applauded that lady, in high derision.

Bob's eyes softened. "I'm just wondering," he told her, "what I wouldn't give to be just your age and have the dreams your years give, and perhaps to know again what love is like."

Aunt Clara dropped her cigarette. "That settles it. We've got to go before he sets it to music. Love and dreams and everything. I can stand cavalry profanity and modernistic painting, but middle-aged poetry—" She rose and dusted the ash from her dress. "Adela, come out of this influence."

Adela laid her hand against the rancher's cheek. "Get well, soon, old friend, and I'll tell you another story—perhaps a love story. And I'll leave you to find for me the happy ending."

"There'll be a happy ending, somehow. Never doubt it, Adela *mia*."

But before that night was over, the hope of any happy ending was farther away than ever before.

For it was on that evening Bob had sent Ted over to Mendoza's to bring Ann Reed out to the hacienda.

"Ann has some information," he told Ted. "She won't trust it even to Manuel. I've sent word that you would come for her."

In the little roadster Ted came for her just before sunset. As he circled the driveway at Mendoza's a Mexican stood eagerly watching from among the palms in the patio. He waited in patient immobility among the shadows until Ted and the girl entered the roadster, then he drove rapidly out toward the hacienda of Paco Morales.

Not until she was seated on Bob's porch and the cigarettes lighted did the girl begin. Then, as she sat there smoking, Ann told them of the visit of Morales and of his seeking for information of El Coyote. Through it all Bob smiled silently.

"I think the old devil suspects," Bob said at last. "Well, unless he moves quickly, his suspicions won't help him. Manuel and I are laying plans of our own. What else is new, little oracle of the border?"

She turned toward Radcliffe. "There was something I learned that may interest you. You know, they talk

much of you over at Mendoza's. They talk of your strength and of the time you threw Jito, and always they talk as if sometime you and he are bound to fight again. One night there was a man, a lawyer, over from Sonora. He sat with two others at our table, and for a time Mendoza was with him. When they spoke your name this man from Sonora remembered something about you. I made him talk—it's never very hard to make you men talk. He told me that some years ago a piece of land had been transferred from father to son, and the records of it were entered with his law firm. He said that the land was in your name."

Bob leaned forward. "What did he call the land?"

"He called it the Esperanza property."

"Esperanza!" Bob's gray eyes sparkled. "Good Lord, that holds two of the best waterholes in this part of the country." He drummed with his fingers on the porch rail. "It would be too good," he murmured.

Ted's own eyes were bright with excitement. "That was the name," he cried. "That was the name dad used the last night we talked. But how would it get transferred to me?"

"I can only guess," Bob replied. "Your father must have transferred it before the crash came. He must have bought that tract when he was laying plans to irrigate the valley, and Morales never knew. That's the best of it. Morales, of course, thought it went up in smoke with the rest of those concessions. Won't that old octopus squirm when he learns that one hundred thousand acres of the best range land he has been using belongs to you!"

"But I still don't understand. Why couldn't anyone have bought it? Why did Morales take the chance of losing it?"

"No one could have bought it, because it wasn't for open sale. To get it you had to have first a concession from the government. Your father got that concession long ago with Morales's influence when they were partners. But neither Morales nor I knew he actually bought any land. Then, through Morales's treachery, your father lost those concessions, but in between he must have made fast to that one tract of land, the Esperanza. Meanwhile, Morales has gone on using it, as he uses dozens of others, preferring that it remain the property of the Mexican government and without expense to him." Suddenly he stopped. "That is, of course, if it's all true. Who told you this?"

"I can't remember. He wrote his name and the law firm down for me. I have his card in my room."

Ted looked at his friend. "This means as soon as you're better I leave for Sonora. If that land is really mine, I'm going to start a little squeezing on my own side of the line. Morales will find he's got a new neighbor."

But Don Bob had already risen in his chair. "If the tale's true it will be a bad blow for Morales's dream of empire. Oh, it's too good to wait for! Let's ride over with Ann. I want to see that name. Then I can do some telegraphing to an *amigo* in Sonora. He'll tell us quick enough."

The girl looked at him in quick concern. "Are you able to drive to Mendoza's?"

Bob's voice was confident. "Dear girl, I've recovered. You've been the best little doctor in the world."

He went inside, strapped on his shoulder holster, and led them down the steps. In the darkness as they drove up at Mendoza's none noticed the long limousine parked in the shadow of the patio. Before they reached the door Bob stopped.

"Ann better not be seen with me. You two go in ahead. I'll take a table and Ted can get that card from you and join me."

She led Radcliffe down the long, darkened hall, and throwing open the door of her room, turned on the light. "Sit down a moment," she said and, closing the door, stepped behind the tapestry that hung before her small dressing-room. In a moment she had returned with a card, but as the man rose to go she shook her head. "I've got to sing soon, but I want to talk to you now for five minutes while you're here alone. It's about you." She reached for the spangled dress and a pair of stockings, then disappeared behind the tapestry, and Ted heard her kicking off her shoes.

"I wanted to warn you that you're in danger—very real danger," came the voice. "Morales suspects you are in love with his niece. He's afraid she is beginning to love you."

"How do you know?"

For a moment he heard only the soft rustle of silk, then she answered: "Morales himself. Two days ago he came here. He offered me money to entangle you, so that she would hate you. I agreed because so long as he hopes this plan may succeed you will come to no

harm. After that, I'm afraid to think. We mustn't worry Bob, but we've got to—"

A light knock sounded on the door. He heard her little start of surprise, and saw her bare arm and shoulder as she pulled the tapestry aside.

"*Quien es?*" she called.

For answer the door swung slowly open. With a choked cry Ted started to his feet. There at the doorway stood Morales, his face twisted in an exultant smile, and at his elbow was Adela. For a moment their eyes took in the picture, the man standing by the chair, and behind him, clutching the tapestry, that half-clothed figure of the girl that all the border knew as Ann Reed.

Very deliberately Morales spoke. "A thousand pardons. I had hoped to have my niece meet the charming singer. It would seem she is—pleasantly occupied."

As the door swung closed, Ted leaped forward, but the girl flung her arms about him.

"Not now," she pleaded, while her hands held him back. "You mustn't give her a chance to say something she can't recall. Give her time to think. Wait until you're calm. Then go to her."

In Ted's brain was still the memory of Adela's eyes, and for a mad moment his hands twisted with blind rage. Roughly he unwound the girl's arms, and left the room.

Downstairs he ran through the long patio, then out into the night. Adela was nowhere. He searched inside the gaming hall, passed down the line of tables, then hurried into the patio again.

Mendoza stood looking down the road.

"The señor seeks someone?"

"Paco Morales."

The little innkeeper waved toward the road. "Only this moment he left—Señor Morales and his lovely niece." Mendoza looked up at the big, grim-faced man and added in mild surprise, "She was weeping, the poor little lady—weeping on such an exquisite night of spring!"

CHAPTER XXVII

AS Ted swept down the long aisle between the tables Bob looked up. Something in the man's quick tread warned him of impending trouble, for never before had his face been so stern, the eyes so deadly. And his voice, as he told Bob what had happened upstairs, held a pent-up fury even more menacing than his eyes. Bob sat for a long moment in thought. At last he said: "I'm inclined to agree with Price that the old Spaniard is just a little mad. How he must have hurt Adela!"

"I can't forget her eyes—they weren't accusing—they weren't even questioning—they were only terribly sad." Ted raised a clenched hand and the square line of his jaw set. "Morales wants open war—now, by God, he'll have it."

"Softly, old son."

"Softly! I've walked softly long enough. To hell with more sidestepping," Ted burst out. "I'm fed up with smiles and words. Oh, it's all clear enough! He wants me out of this country and out of Adela's heart. And if he has to—he'll kill." Ted looked about him. "I could do a little killing myself tonight."

Bob rose. "I think, old fellow, we'd better be going. Jito and his gang are out in the bar—we don't want any trouble."

Once again Ted's jaw set. "Ever since I came here I've been avoiding trouble with Morales and his vaqueros. Tonight it's their turn to step aside."

After a moment's hesitation Bob shrugged and dropped back into his chair. They sat in silence, their unseeing eyes fixed before them, while about them the music swayed and dancers passed and repassed, looking down curiously on the two grim-faced men.

Then, as Bob turned to break the black silence, a waiter hurried to their table and leaned over Ted's shoulder.

"Señor, Jito gives you his message from the bar. He hopes you will join him in a drink when you are no longer engaged upstairs."

The insolence of that challenge stung Ted to instant action. He jumped to his feet, upsetting the little table. His eyes became narrow, bloodshot slits, but his voice was calm. "Come," he said to Bob. "I am accepting Jito's invitation—and God help one of us tonight."

Just outside the door that led into the long bar of Mendoza's, the two men stopped. All bedlam had broken loose in there, and above the chorus of shouts rose the crash of splintered wood, then the silvery shattering of glasses. The thud of a heavy body followed, and the roar of voices redoubled. Bob loosened the top button of his shirt. Then he opened the door.

In sharp contrast to the darkened patio, the white lights of the mirrored barroom for a moment dazzled their eyes. Lined up before the bar twenty or more sombreroed Mexican vaqueros stood, quirts hanging loose at their belts, roweled spurs biting into the wooden floor. A table toward the lower end of the bar had overturned, and bottles and glasses were scattered about it,

but it was toward the upper end that the eyes of the vaqueros led. The crowd had drawn back to the wall, leaving a space of oak floor empty, and here, in the center, lay one of Mendoza's waiters. Above him, leaning over, was the huge, bent figure of a cowboy, and as he raised his dark face, Ted recognized Jito. An ugly grimace played about the Mexican's mouth. He seemed to be turning over in that slow brain of his what next to do to the prostrate form before him.

"Throw him out, Jito," laughed a little vaquero. "Teach him not to interfere with *caballeros*."

Again the air was filled with cries and oaths, while his men urged Jito on. The big Mexican stooped, picked up the waiter, carried him to the door and, raising him high above his head, hurled the man into the darkness. A storm of laughter and applause arose, but suddenly, as Jito turned back, all voices ceased, and in that sudden silence one might have heard the beating of his own heart.

For Jito had caught sight of Ted standing in the doorway, and across the giant vaquero's face came a look that brought every man to silent immobility and made more than one reach to see if his knife was sheathed by his side. Throughout the room that sudden deadly silence fell, so still the dripping of an overturned bottle sounded down the long length of the room, where a moment before all had been an orgy of noise. There was no mistaking the message in Jito's eyes. In Ted's wrists the blood tingled, and he smiled as he sensed at last the breaking of that long-awaited storm.

To Don Bob, too, as he stood there, flashed the thought that now before them the inevitable clash was at hand. The desert was not wide enough for those two men. Ted felt Bob's hand close quietly about his arm, and a whispered voice said, "Wait."

Step by step the great-shouldered vaquero came on. It was like the advance of a grizzly, leisurely, triumphant, gloating, and irresistible, as if he knew that time meant nothing, and that the end was sure. Almost within arm's length of Ted the Mexican stopped, so near that Radcliffe could see the bloodshot eyes, and the little beads of sweat that stood out on the dark forehead. Jito swept low his broad sombrero in a gesture of ironic welcome.

"You do us much honor, señores, much honor." The words came a little thickly. The voice was not quite steady, but the black eyes blazed with unmistakable hatred. "I had not thought to see you so honor a band of simple vaqueros. I thought such talents as yours, señores, were more suitable for the company of women."

The grip on Ted's arm tightened. "Not yet," the quiet voice warned.

Jito watched them. He stood, legs slightly crouching, as if awaiting a blow. The unmoved silence of those two lashed him to fury. They were so utterly alone, so completely surrounded by his waiting horde, and yet they seemed so wholly unafraid. Sliding his riding boot forward on the smooth floor, Jito moved a pace nearer.

The memory of this American, and of the night that

he had spent out on the desert with Adela, the memory of Adela drawing down the face of this man and kissing his lips—suddenly all this blazed like fire within Jito, so that the black eyes had become pin-points of hatred, and the slow voice had sunk to a growl. He spoke directly to Ted now.

"Do you remember, señor, that once I told you some day we might test our strength and lay all the foolish rules of the game aside? That we might fight as men fight who fight for life itself? Well, what time could be better than now to amuse ourselves, señor, and to entertain these comrades of mine? Or"—his voice rose and he spat the words contemptuously at the man before him—"or would you prefer less dangerous games, such as losing a girl on the desert that you might boast to the world you are her lover?"

The restraining hand had dropped from Ted's sleeve. The faint sobbing of a violin in the patio was the only sound throughout the room. No one breathed. Ted took one step forward. With his open hand he struck the dark, scowling face with a force that shot the Mexican's mighty neck back. Then, while the sound of that blow still filled the room, Ted spoke.

"You lying bastard." The low-voiced words carried to the far-off corners of the silent room.

Jito's breath came with a gasp of uncontrollable rage. His hand slipped to the knife at his side and froze there, for now he was looking into the barrel of Don Bob's .45 automatic.

In rapid Spanish came Don Bob's words. "Let no one make a move." His eyes swept the crowd, and

swarthy hands that had sought their belts stiffened and dropped. Two steps backward brought Bob to the bar, and with a little spring he seated himself upon it. He was looking down, now, upon those upturned faces. A sea of tense, hostile faces all turned toward him—all except Ted's who still stood watching the menacing form of Jito.

"You have gone somewhat out of your way to force this fight, Jito *mio*," Don Bob began, and he laid the automatic beside him on the bar. "Well, there is no place better than this, no time better than now if this must come, since you, Jito, would have it so." His voice rose a little. "Meanwhile, whatever happens, let no man take any part. The first who interferes with knife or gun or fist dies quickly." He smiled in his friendly, quiet fashion down on the vaqueros. "I hope in this I am quite clear, *amigos*."

Jito laughed. He whipped off the belt that held the long knife and threw it to Don Bob. He kicked off his spurs and hurled them with his sombrero and chaps across the room, and now he stood, his great form unencumbered, his eyes happy with the coming conflict.

"You fool," he called up to Don Bob. "You fool, to think this boy can live against me. We play no game tonight. Tonight we fight for life and not to push each other's shoulders in the dust." He raised both bearlike paws on high. "Tonight I know no rules, and with these two hands, Señor Don Bob, I tear to pieces your Eastern boy who comes among us with his woman's face and with a woman's ways."

Ted had stripped off his coat. As he laid it beside Bob the older man whispered: "On your guard for every low trick in the game, and if you get him, don't let up. There's the hate of death itself in his eyes."

Ted nodded. "I know," he said, and turned toward his adversary. In the face of danger Radcliffe had become calm again. Once more he was the cool, watchful fighter, alert and unafraid.

The room was still with the silence of death, and beyond the cleared circle before the bar every man stood motionless and tense, their breathless gaze fastened on those two figures who held each other's eyes beneath the blazing lights. Their shadows lay huddled beneath them as they stood now, barely an arm's length apart, watchful and deadly. They seemed greater than human, crouching there. They seemed not human at all. More like two primeval forces, two storm gods out of some legend of past heroic days. Jito spoke in his low, growling voice.

"*Cuidado, Americano.* We fight now in a game where all is fair, and I think this time I tear you apart. Are you ready?"

Ted smiled.

Quietly Jito stepped sidewise, with his great torso bent forward and the big arms swaying loosely in front of him, like the arms of a gorilla. Alert and without a sound he began that sidewise, slouching walk of his, making a kind of shuffling circle about Ted, watching him, waiting his chance. A quarter of a circle he had made, while Ted never moved, except to turn a little. Unheeded, the cigarette in Don Bob's mouth had gone

out. Not a vaquero breathed. The very soul of every man was out there in that silent circle of waiting death.

Then, without warning, Ted leaped. There was a quick inrush of breath from the spectators. None expected it. All had thought the first move would come from Jito. With the leap of a panther, the man's heavy body hurled itself through the air, his arms shot forward, and like pistol shots his fists rang out against Jito's jaw. The Mexican stumbled back, and now the lights gleamed on a long, cruel gash below his mouth. Ted darted back, but like lightning Jito's right hand had closed over his wrist, and with a lunge and a growl the Mexican closed. His free arm wrapped about Ted's neck, and the short, powerful fingers gripped Ted's throat. They tightened, and the corded veins of the vaquero's arm told of the punishing vise that had begun cutting the life from his adversary.

"*Dios,*" whispered a vaquero. "He will tear the Americano's throat out." They were too close now for blows. In the bearlike hug of the Mexican, Ted's chest pressed against Jito's shoulder. The tearing pain at his throat blinded him, blood was pounding in his head for want of air, and always those gripping fingers tightened. The lights seemed to flicker and grow dull. His agonized lungs were bursting. Desperately Ted reached down and twisted his own arms low about the vaquero's waist, then heaved with all his might. Slowly the Mexican's weight left the ground, and Ted swung the great body outward, then lunged forward.

With a crash they struck the floor, Jito beneath.

As the vaquero's head hit the boards, Ted felt that killing grip loosen. With all his might he pulled back and away and struggled to his knees. His head throbbed dully, his breath came in painful gasps, but almost in the same moment that implacable foe was again upon him.

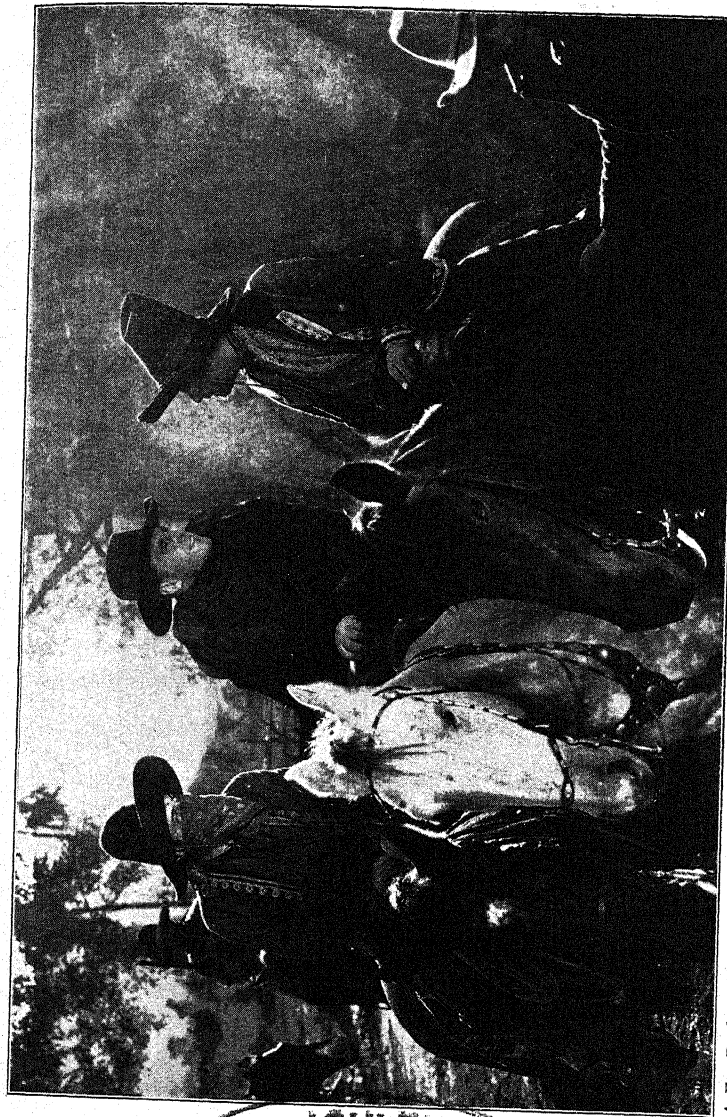
Out of the shadow beyond the circle of light, Ted saw Jito rise and again hurl himself forward. Like lightning Ted jumped aside, and the Mexican's hand caught only his shirt, ripping it from his body. He turned as if in the air, and in another second they were linked together again, clawing, snarling like maddened beasts, striking out where there was room to strike, locked in entwining arms that ever and again rose and fell with bruising thuds or with the rip of torn flesh. Sweat dripped from their bodies, their clothes hung in rags about their waists, their breathing had become a gasping, sobbing thing. But ever they fought on.

Once they fell and rolled, shaking the room with the impact. Once Jito, pulling himself free, climbed astride the other and raised his hand for one annihilating stroke, only to fall back before the whiplike lashes of Ted's fists.

Men ached from the strained positions they had taken, yet they could not move. Hours seemed to pass while these two crushed and tore each other's bodies. Jito's lip hung open and bleeding, and his cheeks were puffed so that the black eyes seemed to blaze out of two deep caverns. That long scar above his eyes glowed an angry red. Ted's throat was matted with blood, and his head torn by the Mexican's claws.

They stood now, toe to toe, driving pistonlike blows into each other's bodies, then again Jito lunged forward and closed. This time he flung both arms about Ted and hurled him across the room. Ted struck a table, crashed through it, and fell face downward against the wall. In a second Jito was on him, eager this time to end it all, but as the Mexican's hand slipped over the American's shoulder, Ted reached up and seized his wrist in the viselike grasp of his own two hands. Aided by the impetus of the Mexican's rush he swung Jito about, then thrust upward, and now the vaquero's hand was being forced up between his shoulder-blades in the dreaded hammerlock. Still keeping his hold with one hand, Ted wrapped his right arm about the Mexican's neck, then pushed with all his might. Slowly Jito's arm rose. Frantically he whipped about him to seize some vulnerable part of the boy, but his clawing hand found no hold. Second by second his arm was being thrust upward until the great muscles creaked and Jito's mouth opened in a groan of pain and rage.

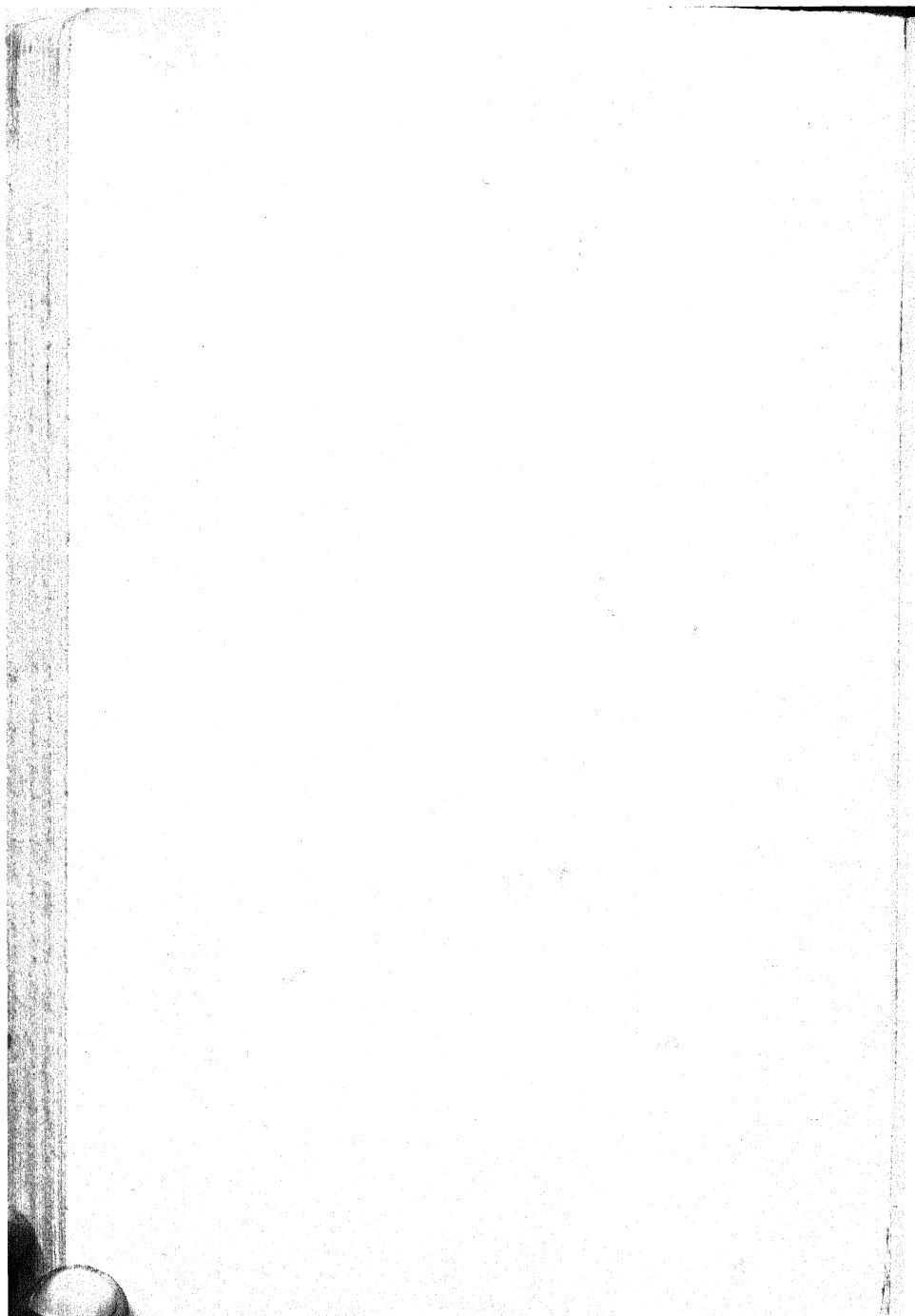
They were motionless now, those two grotesque, hulking bodies, beneath the glare of the lights. Their clothing hung in tattered shreds. Their breathing came in agonized sobs, and already one of Jito's eyes had closed. Ted's own face was haggard, his jaw had dropped, and the blue veins on his forehead stood out like cords beneath his wet hair. Yet in this last supreme effort his aching muscles knotted as he forced Jito's captive hand still higher, still nearer the breaking point. Once more a low groan was wrung from the Mexican's



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lips as Ted forced his arm upward inch by inch in that killing hold. Jito's shoulder was on fire. Flinging his head back, he tried to batter the man's face with his great skull, and once his head crashed on the point of Ted's chin with a sharp crack. For an instant the American's hold weakened, then, with a last effort, strengthened, and again the merciless hammerlock tightened. Already the Mexican's great sinews were cracking with the agony and strain of it. His neck had swollen. The great head lolled from side to side in a very ecstasy of pain, but still the dark giant fought on. One gripping hand had caught Ted by the shoulder, and in a last frantic effort tore the skin with clenched nails. No sound. It might have been a place of death except for the sobbing breath of those two forms, horrible now to look at, savage, beyond all thought and all sensation except for the blood lust that rioted in both their brains. They were no longer men. They were two primeval forces of the world, symbols of clashing destinies. They were hate incarnate.

And still, head down, eyes closed, sweat pouring over bloody skin, they struggled on.

"Mother of God," one murmured hoarsely from the crowd, "never before have men fought as these men fight. They are wolves, these two, mad wolves. Look, in God's name! Now the Americano strangles him!"

For, still holding Jito's wrist in his left hand, Ted had wound his right arm closer about the Mexican's neck and little by little was tightening his hold. Jito's eyes bulged. Once a stifled gurgle rose from his torn lips. Shifting his weight to his left foot he whipped

suddenly about with all the force of his right leg, in a frantic attempt to maim Ted, but he was too close. Like a dying man his free arm rose high in the air, his fingers opened and clutched horribly. The man's life was being forced from his very body by this merciless antagonist.

Once among those silent spectators a form moved. One of Jito's vaqueros whipped a knife from his belt and stepped forward, but the click of a cocked automatic sounded unmistakably loud in the silent room. He looked up to see the gray eyes of Don Bob watching warily. Bob said no word, but the heavy Colt had shifted ever so little toward the Mexican who held the knife. Quickly the man dropped back into the crowd.

Then, suddenly, it was ended.

Once again the great fist of Jito raised impotently into the air, but the jerking, mighty fingers clutched nothingness, and now his knees bent and his head fell limply forward. It was over. The giant of the border was down. One last moan of agony rose from those tortured lips, and his eyes closed. As he slid to the floor, Ted threw his arms about him, raised him and carried that great, unconscious form across the room. On the bar he laid his fallen adversary and stood for a long moment watching him while his own heart pounded wildly in his breast. For a moment the room swayed. His chest rose and fell, gasping for air. Then he raised his head toward Bob and tried to smile.

The older man had turned toward the watchful little knot of vaqueros. "This man," Bob said to them in Spanish, "gives you back your chief. If he had chosen

he might have killed him. We go now, but let none of you move until we are away."

Once more Ted looked at the crumpled hulk lying so strangely quiet across the bar. All hatred, all bitterness had gone out of him—he felt only a great weariness, a desire for sleep. Don Bob threw his coat over Radcliffe's shoulders and led him out into the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII

NEXT morning Ann Reed sat in her room smoking a late after-breakfast cigarette. Downstairs Mendoza's was still afire with the tale of last night's encounter. Through the desert ranches and toward the foothills men were spreading the tale as they rode out in the early dawn. Twice already Mendoza had thrust his dark face into the singer's room to repeat to her some word of that night's memorable battle, but now, as she looked up from beside the sunny window, Mendoza had different news.

"A señorita asks to come up." There was a quaver of excitement in his voice. "It is the Señorita Morales." For a moment the little man was silent. "It must be about that fight of those two mad giants. *Qué va?* All the border will know of this by night. And then what will those swaggering vaqueros of Paco Morales say?"

The long lashes of the girl lifted. She smiled and dropped the cigarette into a bowl before her. "Ask Señorita Morales to come up."

And she was still smiling when the door opened and Adela Morales stood in the doorway.

Their eyes held each other with a long, questioning look. To the older woman Adela seemed enviably young and splendidly alive as she stood there hesitant in the doorway. A shaft of light from the window touched the coppery hair curling beneath the broad-brimmed Panama. The flush of desert winds was in her cheeks. She entered and softly closed the door.

"You know who I am," she said.

Ann Reed nodded. "And I know, too, why you came. Please sit down."

As Adela pulled off her driving gloves the singer saw her lips quiver, and knew that tears were not far from her eyes. A sudden wave of sympathy for the girl caught her. She broke the silence. "You were taken in last night by what you saw here, weren't you? Just for a moment?"

Adela nodded, her eyes still bright with tears.

"Your uncle is stupid. But all men are stupid, so why complain?" The singer lighted a cigarette. "And yet that was a dangerously cruel thing to do. You know, I had to hold back that big giant of yours, or he might have made Paco Morales very sorry for himself. But you don't need me to tell you who this gringo giant of yours really loves, do you? Of course you don't. You only came to me to make sure. It was a courageous thing. I wonder if any man is worth it?"

Then slowly, dispassionately, but with relentless accuracy, Ann Reed told of Morales's earlier visit and of the offer he had made.

"How he knew that Radcliffe was in my room last night, I can't say," she finished.

"But why was he here?"

Ann smiled understandingly. "He came up to get a note for Don Bob. That's all."

The frank friendship in her eyes won Adela. "Until I was in bed and began thinking, I think I hated you both, and I had no right to hate, for—I have no claim on him."

"I know. I know terribly well of love that has no claim. But after you thought about it you realized."

"I only knew that there was some mistake—that there had to be a mistake, and I had to come to you first. It taught me—how much I cared."

Again the singer smiled. "That was worth something, wasn't it? If you had been less straightforward, Morales might have done the harm he'd hoped to do. You know, the greatest favor I could do you would be to tell you not to trust your uncle. If you love this American boy—and I think you do—watch Paco Morales. I don't believe he would stop at anything to keep you two apart."

Ann rose, and, walking to where the girl sat, laid a white hand on her shoulder. "You're young, and you have courage, my dear, and many people will love you. The world for you should be a glorious place to live in. Don't ever spoil it. Don't let doubts and suspicions come between you and that big gringo of yours. And if you both love, then give yourselves utterly to love. Don't let uncles or differences of race or anything in this world keep you apart. That's all the wisdom I can give you." The calm eyes that were neither sad nor gay looked down almost wistfully at the face where the miracle and radiance of love had come.

She may have sighed. "You were made for happiness. Go and claim it. Danger lies ahead for both of you. Your lover has two of the most powerful enemies in the border. Watch them both. And trust."

Impulsively Adela kissed her. "You've helped me more than you know," she whispered, and ran down the hall.

For a long time the singer sat watching the thin rib-

bon of smoke as it spiraled upward from a broken cigarette. Then, very quietly, she laid her head among the pillows and covered her face.

Straight from Mendoza's Adela drove to the house of Don Bob, and as the rancher ran down the steps she laid both hands on his arm.

"You heard what my uncle did?"

He nodded.

"It was unworthy of a *caballero*. I am ashamed for him and for me. But what shall I say to Ted?"

He patted her hand. "Better say nothing at all, dear. It's over, and besides Ted had quite a busy evening after that."

"How is he? And where is he?"

Bob nodded toward the house. "Inside, trying to shave with his left hand. He's just a little awkward this morning, for some reason." Then his eyes were fired with the memory of that struggle, and he shook the girl gently by the shoulders. "Our Ted made immortal border history last night, Adela. Jito's defeat will mean more for the peon than a dozen of El Coyote's raids. But when did you hear of it?"

"By dawn this morning the vaqueros brought the news to the ranch, and an hour later Jito rode in. He was terribly battered. Uncle and I put him to bed, and later he and Jito had a long talk together, but they told me nothing."

A door closed above them, and they looked up to see Ted. His right hand was bandaged and above his forehead stretched an angry bruise. As he saw Adela his

face lightened. Running quickly down the steps he took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"I've been so worried since I heard," she said simply, and even now there was a little tremor in her voice. "You're not hurt?"

Ted shook his head. He tried to speak casually. "I'm as sore as the very devil, but not hurt. Your little cousin has left his mark on every square inch of me, but in six months or a year I'll be fit as ever."

Together they sought the shadow of the porch, and as Don Bob lighted the girl's cigarette she looked swiftly up at Ted. "I'm not going to talk about last night—not ever. It was a cruel stupid act of my uncle's—I shan't forgive him for that. You see, my friend, I have never known any American well—and so my uncle is bitterly afraid I may fall in love with you." She smiled. "Is it not a compliment, big Americano?" Then, suddenly serious again, she added: "But all this means you are in danger—very real danger. Jito will not let many days pass before he wipes out the memory of last night. And it may be my uncle will help him. You must not come into Mexico again, Ted. Even here you are not safe."

"Safe from what?"

"From Jito, and from something—I don't know what. There's a shadow I can't explain but that frightens me. Don't you feel it, Bob?"

Bob smiled slowly. He looked out over the desert. "Danger here as everywhere. Always the bright face of danger. What can Ted do about it?"

"He can keep out of Mexico."

"Would you really want him to?"

Ted himself answered. "That's just what I can't do, Adela. I'm running Bob's cattle over in Mexico, and I'll be riding into the Mexican ranges as a regular part of the work. It will be better if I just ignore last night and let Jito do what he wants. In any event, I'd hate to have him think that I'm hiding. Personally, I believe Jito and I can afford to call it quits."

He looked down unsmilingly at his bandaged hand.

Bob nodded to Adela. "This belligerent foreman of mine isn't going to be worth a centavo as a cowpuncher today. If you're driving to town you might take him from under my feet."

"Sold!" Eagerly Ted reached for his hat. "It's the first holiday I've ever been offered—let's go before this old slave driver repents."

And together they ran down the steps to the girl's car.

"You're going to meet Father Campos if you come with me," Adela told him as they sped along. "He fled over here to the little Mexican chapel in Verdi when the churches were closed by the government in Mexico. He'll be good for that warlike soul of yours. Have you met him?"

But Ted shook his head. "I don't even know where the church is. I've always had a half distrust for churches. They seem to keep out God."

"What an odd thought!"

"Not to me. Always to me God has meant sunshine and open sky. It's as if there is a great deal of God in the wind and in the silence of the stars. More than in church. Is that a foolish thought?"

"Who can tell? You might ask the padre."

At the entrance to the little sun-baked church they found the man of God seated in the shade of a willow. Many years had passed over Padre Campos, and some sorrows. He had seen the growth of that country from a little prairie village to the paved and bustling town of Verdi. He had seen swift killings, and many of those baptized by his own hands he had lived to see die in violent and sudden passions. And all this had left him with eyes that were a little weary, but with lips that were always ready to smile. It was something the years had never dimmed, the sweetness and sympathy of that smile.

He spoke without the least accent as he took Ted's hand.

"I had heard of you, my son, when first you came. Today I hear of your great strength and of the use you put it to last night. Would it be presumptuous for an old man to say that I am sorry the strength God gave you should be turned to the pain of another man?"

"I had no choice, father."

"I know, I know. Jito is a violent child. He has never learned that until one is master of one's own passion, he is only an animal."

Still smiling, the old padre turned to the girl. "You would make even the great anti-Christ, Nietzsche, believe in angels, with that face of yours. But let us go inside, where it is cool."

Adela smiled up at Ted. "I wonder if we dare? You see, padre, this young man believes—how did he say it?—that churches keep out God."

The old priest nodded gravely. "Many churches have

tried to, my child, but where love enters, there is God. Is that not true, my son?"

A throb of understanding caught Radcliffe at the old man's words. Here was one who had learned to live at peace with his own soul, who, in a world where about him men fought and plotted, still believed in the power of love. Together they went in from the blazing noonday sun to the cool obscurity of the little church. Peace was there. The closing door shut out the world.

"A church," the padre was saying as he looked at the bare rafters above, "a church is not important either for good or evil except as it lifts up men's hearts. That is why, when they drove me out of Mexico and closed the churches, I did not despair, for I knew that if we had any place in the hearts of the people some day we should come back. And I knew if we had no place it would be better that we do not ever come back. Besides, we Mexicans have a saying, 'The desert is of God and in the desert no man may deny him.' "

He looked long and earnestly at Ted. "They tell me you have come here to make your home, my son. Are you happy among us?"

Ted flushed a little beneath the direct look, and the questioning. "I have never been so happy. I have made some good friends and—"

"And some good enemies," added the priest, with a little smile. "Well, your enemies cannot hurt you. Only yourself can do that and—those you love."

"Those I love?"

"Why, certainly. The ones we love have in them the greatest power to hurt us, and yet without love we

could not be happy either. It is one of the paradoxes of the dear God."

Adela laid a folded bill in the old priest's hand. "Use it as seems best to you, father."

He smiled. "Those generous gifts of yours, Adela, have made the way easier for many of my parish. Like children they believe quite literally that God will provide, and usually He does provide, although it keeps His humble representative busy. That reminds me of one I promised to see at noon. Wait for me here and rest. I will not be more than a half-hour." And, turning, he hurried out.

Adela seated herself on the narrow wooden bench beside the door.

"If all men were like Padre Campos, there would be no need of cavalry or bandits or"—she smiled up at him—"of young men plucking each other's ribs out." She looked about her. "Almost my first memories are of this church when I was so small the pews looked mountain high and the yellow sunlight up there seemed to come straight from God."

Ted did not answer. Instead his eyes rose to where the colored panes of glass before the Virgin filtered soft ribbons of light down upon the floor. At the far end a little cluster of candles twinkled, and from somewhere came the drowsy chirping of birds. The spell, the peace of it, filled and held him, and when he spoke it was with a kind of half-regret.

"All my life I had hoped for peace like this, to make it a part of me, and whenever the need comes I have failed."

"And have you never found peace, Ted Radcliffe?" Her voice sounded very calm and close beside him in the cool gloom.

He gave a short laugh. "You see how I have found peace. In a few months here in Verdi I have bruised and battered a man, made an enemy of your uncle, and beyond all this I may yet lose something I value more than anything in the world."

"And that?"

"You!"

The word seemed to hesitate upon the air, as if reluctant to die. It charged the little church with a new meaning. He had spoken a word and suddenly everything was changed, and he waited, fearful, yet exalted.

In the dimness he moved nearer the shadowy girl. His voice was softer than she had ever heard. "Listen to what I am saying, Adela, and make no answer until I am done. Last night, when your uncle brought you to that room, I saw your eyes just before you turned away. There was no anger there—only a kind of pity and sorrow. I knew then, clearer than I have ever known anything in the world, that I might far better lose everything in life than lose you. The rest of that night didn't matter. I would rather that Jito had beaten me a hundred times than lose the right to look into your eyes or hear the sound of your voice—or to hope."

"Hope?" The voice in the silence of the little church was like a sigh. The merest ghost of a voice.

"The hope of your love. Is it contemptible to say that to you? I thought so once, but now I can't feel it

contemptible that a man almost penniless should tell you he loves you. For to me this love bulks so much bigger than all the rest of life. And because, too, there is something in me better than I myself am—older and more enduring than I am—and it tells me that I care for you as others love life and freedom—as this padre cares for God. You must already know how life has changed for me since that far-off day I first saw you. I wish—I wish very deeply I could say that a better man speaks to you now, but I can only say that, good or bad, weak or strong, I love you.”

Outside the world was hushed with the hush of mid-day. A vagrant cloud floated slowly before the sun and deepened the dusk within the church, where those two stood rapt and silent before the eternal majesty of love. He looked up toward the bowed head of the Virgin, then, bowing his own head, raised the girl's hand to his lips.

In the pulse beneath his fingers he felt the blood throb, and soft fingers touched his hair. And a voice, softer still, whispered through the church's gloom, “Whether we should love one another—whether we have the right to love one another, only the dear God knows. I only know, Ted Radcliffe, that with all my heart I do love you—I always have.”

Then again those eager, caressing fingers moved through his hair, passing softly, lingeringly across his cheek, and at last came to rest upon his lips. So for a time they stood, silent, radiantly silent, in the presence of this imperishable, age-old wonder that had come upon them.

"We are of different races, you and I," the girl's voice whispered in the gloom, "and our ways have been different ways. It may be that love will bring more of pain than of joy. Yet even if I knew, oh, if I knew beyond all doubt, that only sorrow and pain awaited, I would not change in any smallest way this love I have for you."

Again silence. Her hands still lay against his cheek. Her eyes, like stars in the gathering dusk, looked up at him. He kissed her lips.

AND it was so the padre found them. The little priest's discreet cough came as from another world.

Adela turned. She looked into his understanding eyes. "We love each other, father," she said simply, and her voice sounded low and exultant through the dimness of the quiet chapel. "I have given him my lips here in your church, *padre mio*. Have I done wrong?"

The wrinkled hands touched the rosary. "Wrong? What can there be of wrong when love comes to two children of God? That is the highest of His benedictions. And because I know you, Adela, I know you to be worthy of all the happiness this world can give."

He looked searchingly into the young man's face. "This love, my son, is the greatest of life's gifts. It comes not lightly or without purpose. It gives, but it also demands. It must find one worthy or it goes and does not return. Love is a testing of all that is most worthy in every man. None, I think, are more unhappy on earth than those love has once visited and found unworthy. Better never to have known its sweetness than, knowing it, to have lost it forever. The wisdom of love is a very old wisdom. It seeks out only the best in you, striving to perpetuate the best in those others that love brings into being. Many who have grown too impatient for love and have been weary of waiting, take poor substitutes and then lament because their lives lack richness and their hearts lack content."

Again the priest looked earnestly into the younger man's eyes, as if striving to find there some answer to the riddle the future held for those two love-enmeshed children who stood so confidently before him. He shook his head. "To me you are the symbol of youth—youth that seeks out love in spite of all the world. We may not know what tomorrow brings. I think your uncle, Adela, will not be overpleased to hear of this, for he had other plans. And I think that Jito, who has always loved you, may go mad with jealousy, and perhaps seek to harm you both. So I can only say to you, since you love each other—go forward clearly and trustingly into the glory of that love, and do not be afraid." He traced a shadowy sign of the cross. "May the peace of God and the love of men go with you both, my children."

They stood outside the church in the blinding sunshine of early afternoon. The same quiet, drowsy hum of bees, the same deep, unbroken peace, and the glittering sun on baked adobe walls. The shadows had lengthened a little. The burro still dozed beneath the shadow of a mimosa. Nothing had changed, except for them. They had found happiness. They had found each other.

And, held silent by its wonder, they walked down the worn steps of the church and across to where the girl's car stood.

She seated herself behind the wheel, and again they drove slowly out of Verdi and to the edge of the mesa, where, by some tacit consent, they stopped at the high rocky turn just where the road begins to wind down-

ward. For a time they looked out across the ranch-dotted valley stretching south to where the blue Mexican hills trembled in the rising heat waves. Far below them curled the river, like a tarnished ribbon, and along its banks the little village and the ranches touched with spots of green the tawny desert sands. As they watched through the clear April sunlight the same thought came to both. Men lived down there. Down there were homes and children. Men were working out their lives and dreams, sowing and harvesting, loving and begetting, living out their years in toil and tears and laughter. At last Ted spoke:

"These people are your people and mine, living on both sides of that stream, with their homes and their flocks. I want them to be part of my life, too, I want to take my own place here in the border country—to help build—to make a home for both of us and to end forever this hate and fear and distrust."

She smiled, but the smile was hardly a happy one.

"I know. And I know what that fight is going to mean for both of us. It is going to mean sorrow and the tearing of old bonds and the hurting of people I love. It is going to mean sorrow for my uncle and perhaps sorrow for me."

For answer he kissed her and raised his arm toward the land that lay like a colored toy map unrolled before them. His pointing finger traced out the small ranches dotted as far as the eye could see back toward the foothills.

"These were once my father's people, and their enemies are my father's enemies and mine. Long before

I was born my father tried to make a home here and the cattle lords cast him out, robbed him, sent him back to Colorado beaten and defeated. I think that may have saddened my mother's last days. I haven't real bitterness against your uncle, but rather against the thing he stands for, and that I hate. And you hate it. You must. I have seen how you love these people, how tenderly you speak of them as 'your people' and I have seen how they love you. I would not have you changed in any way, Adela, for to me you are flawless and perfect. Neither would I bring any shadow of pain into your eyes, and yet—"

"And yet you have your work to do, and that work will be in open conflict with the things my uncle has built up."

He nodded. Then he smiled and looked at the sun, already in the west. "There are some things that must not be delayed," he said, "and we still have time for you to drive me out to the hacienda."

"What for?"

"To tell your uncle that we love each other."

Quickly she shook her head. "But, foolish, we need tell him nothing yet. And when the time comes you had better let me tell him."

"The time has already come." Ted's jaw was set. "After what happened last night, I want Paco Morales to learn from my own lips that I love you and that neither he nor all Mexico can keep us apart. If it is to be war, let it be war. But I want to offer him peace and friendship for the last time. And Jito as well."

In utter amazement the girl looked up at him. "Do

you know what Jito will do when he learns I love you?"

Ted smiled. "He will probably reach for that dangerous-looking bodkin he carries at his waist. That, too, will have to be faced. For, don't you see, my darling, it's all got to be gone through, and that we had better go and meet it now? After all, what has happened? Two people have fallen in love on this glorious day, and have resolved to belong to each other as long as they live, and I want everyone to know. For I'm proud and very happy and"—leaning across the wheel he kissed her—"and utterly unworthy. But first of all I want to tell your uncle myself. So goad on this iron mustang."

Doubtfully she shook her head, then in silence released the brake. "You may be right, my lover," she said, as they started, but again she shook her head over a sentence that needed no completion.

Those twenty miles through the April desert sped by all too quickly. They found themselves dreading the journey's end. It was as if their life must too soon enter into the complex, forbidding world where danger and pride, jealousy and the search for power, all conspired to take away some of the luster and freshness of this new-found love. And it may have been because of these thoughts that Ted turned just before the car stopped at the hacienda gate and, taking her face between his hands, looked almost hungrily down at her. Then, after a long moment, he spoke.

"Adela, what lies ahead of us from this moment on no one can tell. There may be sorrow and anger and

perhaps tragedy itself lurking there. We cannot say. But of this one thing we can be sure—our love. Let nothing come to harm that. Let nothing lessen it or make it doubt. We must always trust, whatever comes. If we hold this love of ours apart from the world, secure in our trust of each other, nothing can harm us."

And the girl, smiling up at him, answered: "Nothing, nothing in all the world can touch my love for you. I am yours, utterly. I would go out with you now, this moment, into the desert forever. Our lives belong to each other, and all the world cannot change it."

Then he bent and kissed her, and together they went inside.

Ted watched the tall figure of Morales rise from behind his desk, and for the merest instant Ted felt the chill of a menacing presence in spite of the Spaniard's cordial smile. Beneath that friendly, suave personality there seemed for an instant to lurk the stark, cold enmity of a killer. Ted could not describe it and never afterward could be sure that it was more than the tension of high-pitched nerves. But behind the tall figure so amiably approaching there seemed to lie the waiting beast of prey.

"Any occasion that brings you to us is a happy one," the old man was saying, and he offered a chair and cigarettes.

"I hope, after I tell you all you won't think this occasion more unhappy than happy," Ted replied.

A little flicker passed over Morales's eyes. "How should that be?"

Ted plunged. "Señor Morales, we Americans are blunt, and I know of no other way to say what I must say except simply and frankly."

"Be as blunt as you please."

"I love Adela. We love each other. I have come to tell you that."

Morales's lips trembled, and the slender hand that held his cigarette closed ever so little. His black eyes swept slowly from Radcliffe's face and rested on Adela.

"Is it true, *chica*?" he asked softly.

Coming forward Adela nodded in silence, then sinking down beside him, laid her cheek against the old man's knee, and so they sat for a moment.

Presently his hand lightly brushed her hair. "So you love him, *chiquita*?" he asked in a voice that seemed strangely tender.

The girl laid her lips against his hand. "More than anything in life," she answered.

The old man sighed, then slowly he smiled. "When one loves," he said, "there is little to add, except that I envy you both. Yet there is much to be said between us." He looked across at Ted. "You see, señor, I want above all else that this Adela of mine shall be happy. A few years more and I shall be gone the way of my ancestors—wherever old ranchers go after the last rodeo. I will sleep better to know that Adela is in good hands.

"Frankly, for her I would have chosen differently, but no one can direct the course of love. Today I neither consent nor forbid. There is much to think of, much for Adela and myself to talk of. So I say only

that no one is to know of this yet. And if you are to see each other, I ask of you, señor, one promise. Let there be no talk of marriage for a time. I must speak to Don Bob and I must consider many things. We cannot ignore that Adela is one of the wealthiest girls in all Mexico."

Ted's face flushed. "Will you believe me when I say I wish Adela had not a penny?"

The other man's eyebrows raised a little. "Ah," he murmured, "you Americans! And you accuse us Latins of being sentimental. Believe me, my son, the possession of pesos and of fertile acres will be no obstacle to your happiness in the days to come."

For a moment Ted hesitated. "There is one thing more to tell you," he said at last. "I am not coming with entirely empty hands. This morning Bob had a wire from Sonora confirming my ownership of the Esperanza property."

The startled Spaniard sprang to his feet. "Esperanza! That is impossible."

"My father bought it years ago from Mexico. Before he died it was transferred to my name. The wire said there was no doubt about the records."

A tremor shook Morales. Quickly he turned from them toward the window, and in his eyes blind fury blazed. Through long minutes he fought for sanity, and when again he turned he still wore that courteous, impassive mask. "Your father was a man of foresight," he smiled. "And yet some say the Esperanza property brings quick misfortune. But we will talk of all these things later."

He rose and, lifting Adela, kissed her; then he shook Ted's hand. For a moment he seemed about to say something more, but turned abruptly and left the room.

Ted's arms folded about the slender girl. "I wish time would stop like this, just like this, forever."

She slipped back with a little tremulous laugh. "Lover of mine, I'm so very, very happy, and the miracle is that uncle is not against us. We'll make Aunt Clara give us dinner."

His lips touched her hair. "I'm so happy," he whispered, "I'm almost afraid."

Upstairs in a semi-darkened room, a tall, gaunt figure stood looking down at the bed, where Jito lay sullenly smoking a cigarette. The vaquero's eyes were swollen, and his face still bore the scars of that losing battle, yet even in the darkness those eyes were lighted with little gleams of undying fire. At last Morales spoke.

"Jito *mio*, what would you do when a man comes between you and all your life's desires?"

"Kill him," came the dispassionate reply.

Morales nodded.

"Who is it now, señor?"

"The Americano, Radcliffe. Within a little time he dies."

The vaquero shrugged. "Why not? Have you another cigarette?"

CHAPTER XXX

ALL that next day Morales denied himself to everyone, even to Jito and Adela. Leaving word that he was not to be disturbed, he remained locked in his room, and not until the following morning did he call Adela to him.

Yet to Adela those hours, as they passed, were marvelously rose-colored. A new world, a new life, lay in all its perfect promise just ahead.

She had never known happiness such as this—this ecstasy of living that made her heart sing triumphantly, even while she awaited her uncle's call.

The summons did not come unexpectedly. From the first it had been clear that whatever feelings her uncle might have about her love for Ted he would say little until he had thought it out to the very end. That was Morales's way.

But the very instant she entered his room, Adela sensed approaching conflict. She knew that now, that present moment, would call for all the patience and forbearance she possessed. Morales sat quietly behind the long mahogany table, where lay a number of papers, some yellow from age. The curtains of the window behind admitted only a faint half-light. Adela passed to the window and threw it wide open.

"How often, my uncle, must I find you ruining those aristocratic eyes? There, that's better. Look what a bright, sunny world you've been keeping from you." She put her arm about his shoulder.

But Morales only frowned at the scattered papers before him. With a little sigh the girl looked down, passed her hand over his thinning hair and dropped to her knees beside him.

"What is it, *tio mio*? Why are you unhappy on this day when I want all the world to be happy, gloriously, utterly happy, as I am? Have you made it up in your mind to quarrel with me?"

He listened gravely to the young, triumphant voice. He looked silently into her face, where her eyes spoke to him of a happiness the old Spaniard had forgotten for many years. Slowly Morales spoke.

"Last night and early this morning I have been reading old letters and documents left by former masters of this hacienda." He touched almost lovingly the yellow papers before him.

"They are quite old, you see. They come down from generation after generation of men from the Spanish times. Always a Morales has been lord over this land. It is a past one may be proud of. For forty years it has been in my care, and I have added to its acres and increased the number of its cattle and the power of its name. I have made a domain of this land, a desert kingdom, yet today I am not content. I had hoped when the time came for me to join my fathers that I should see you with children and a husband fit to become master here."

"That is hardly the right order, uncle," she smiled up at him. "But I think I understand you. You are going to tell me Ted Radcliffe cannot be a fit husband for a Morales."

His eyes refused to meet hers. "I would go farther. I would say no American could be. Their ways are not our ways. And yet, too, I will confess the fault in part has been mine. One forgets how the years pass. To me you are still a child. I have jealously kept you at my side, not realizing that here is no one worthy of marriage with you. One forgets. It was wrong that you should be kept here at home on the border, among peons and half-castes, and American adventurers. I should have kept you longer in Mexico City. Already you are more American than Mexican. That was the fault of your hot-headed father. But that is over."

A spot of color glowed dangerously in the girl's cheeks. "Uncle, aren't you taking a very long way of saying that you don't want me to marry Ted?"

"Do I seem to be saying merely that? No, *chiquita*, what I am really saying is that you will never, never so long as I live, marry Ted Radcliffe."

For a moment the girl looked steadily into his fixed eyes. Then her own eyes flashed. She stood before him, with little clenched hands.

"You tell me that? And I tell you, *tio mio*, that if there is one thing I am sure of in life, it is that I will marry him. I will be his if I must give up everything I have ever known—if it makes me an outcast, poorer than your driven peons. So you waste your time and mine in useless quarrels that hurt us both, and do nothing more. It is not fair that I, who am a woman, should be told that I shall not marry, for I say to you now and for always, I will."

For a time the old Mexican sat brooding before the

girl. He seemed to be considering something faintly amusing. At last he said: "Who shall say? And yet I rather doubt that you will marry this American, since it is my wish that you leave for Mexico City tomorrow morning."

She was past pleading now. For answer she laughed. "Uncle, I have no least intention of going to Mexico City, either tomorrow or next month."

"No?" The thin lips of Morales tightened. "Then you have twenty-four hours to revise your intentions. In the meantime, keep to your room. Jito will drive you to the station in the morning. You forget, I think, that you are in Mexico. Now leave me."

Head held high, she left him, but her hands were still clenched, and once in her own room she threw herself on the bed and gave way to a storm of tears. They were more of anger than of fear, those tears, yet to her came the thought that everything Morales threatened he had the right and power to do. They were, as he had said, in Mexico. It lay wholly within his power as guardian to send her wherever he chose. Slowly the sobs died. She lay on the bed, chin in hand, and looked resentfully out at the bright morning. Once, in a frenzy of grief and anger, her little fist beat upon the pillow and hot tears started to her eyes. From beyond the window she heard the passing of a horseman, humming a Spanish song of love and fate. Suddenly the thought of separation from Ted, of living exiled from him, even for a time, became intolerable. For the next half-hour she lay outstretched on the bed, brooding, planning, and at last she tiptoed to the door.

Just outside she heard someone breathing and knew that already her uncle had set a guard over her. She was a prisoner! Again her eyes flashed in rebellion.

Kicking off her shoes she tiptoed back to the window. Nothing moved outside the big hacienda. Her roadster still stood by the gate, and now she suddenly smiled. Quickly she threw off the light silk dress and slipped into a traveling costume. Again she listened at the door and heard the soft breathing of her uncle's servant outside. She walked to the window and leaned out. The patio and yard beyond lay empty in the glittering sunlight. Thickly on both sides of the window the old wisteria clung to the stucco walls. Softly she raised herself to the low window sill. Hand over hand, very gently, she lowered herself, then reached down with one slender leg until she found a resting place in the gnarled vine. In less than a minute her foot had touched the soft grass beneath, and in another instant she was running down the long path toward the tall black gates.

She looked back. A peon lounged beneath the eucalyptus. Toward the corrals a dog lay, lazily scratching in the shadow of the wall.

She was through the gate now and, vaulting into the seat, touched the starter. The hum of the motor broke the desert stillness and a moment later she was speeding for the open road.

The revolt against Morales had begun.

Once she gained the broad Verdi road the mile posts flashed by. At each rise she glanced behind her, half expecting to see her uncle's car in pursuit, but the run

to Verdi was safely made, and an hour later the fugitive drew up before the major's quarters.

In quiet sympathy Aunt Clara listened to the girl's story, and when the end came, as it did inevitably in a flood of tears, the older woman put her arm about the girl and led her into the quiet coolness of the house.

"Let's worry no more, dear, about trips to Mexico City. Instead we'll talk about that big lover of yours. How did you two children decide you were in love?"

Through her tears the girl smiled up. "That's what's called calming the patient, isn't it?"

"Don't you care what it's called. I'm giving you a wonderful chance to talk about your Ted." She leaned back, looking at the girl with pity and something of envy. "And you do love him, don't you, dear?"

"Love him? It's as if I had been waiting for just this to happen for always. As if all my life before was just a kind of preparation for now. Does love always come like that, Aunt Clara? Does it come to everyone like that? It almost seems that to me alone this thing should be. Is it always like that, and can one keep it like that—like a clear flame?"

The older woman made no answer. She may have been wondering how to reply, wondering if anyone ever could reply to that eternal question.

"Dear," she said at last, "that word love takes me back so many half-forgotten years. You will have to ask a wiser woman how long love lasts or when it goes, or why. I can only tell you that it is the most precious thing that you will ever know, and that the years have nothing to bring in compensation for its loss. For that reason, my advice would be that you see Uncle Morales

and everyone else in the old familiar place before you give up Ted Radcliffe. Today he is the most talked-of human being in all the border country, and Verdi is for him, to a man. Bob told me—this is a dead secret—he's going to make your young man a partner. But how did you decide to love him?"

"I couldn't help it."

She laughed. "Of course not. It just came over you like pneumonia, didn't it, dear?"

Then suddenly Aunt Clara's eyes widened as she looked out the window. She chuckled. "Well, we'll have to admit the dear uncle doesn't let much cactus grow under his feet. Look!"

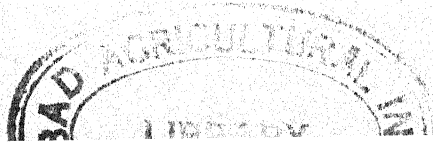
Jumping to the window the girl followed her gaze to see Paco Morales's car swinging down the long, winding road of the military post. She turned to Aunt Clara with a gasp of dismay.

"Oh, I am so weary of fighting and of words," she sighed.

Gently Aunt Clara led her to the stairs. "Up there for you, little girl. Lie down on my bed. I'm going to entertain your precious uncle myself. Thank God for nervous headaches. You've got a beastly one. Run along." She waved the hesitating girl upstairs. "Spanish grandees are just duck soup for me, dear," she assured the girl, "especially when my plans for the day have been all shot to hell."

So it came about that Paco Morales, a moment later, was bowing over the hand of Aunt Clara and listening with polite interest to the fable of Adela's headache. Aunt Clara lost no time in making that part clear.

"Adela's in my room now. The girl is on the verge



of going to pieces. I know, of course, what's passed, and if you don't mind a candid woman's opinion, I've been wondering how an intelligent man like you can at times make such a deplorable ass of himself."

Morales's thin lips parted. "She ran away," he said, "like some common peon girl."

"Of course she did, and for the same fundamental reason—love."

Aunt Clara offered her guest a cigarette, then lighted one herself. "I wonder if you know how astonishing it seems to me to find you, of all men, baffled by this thing called Love. Paco Morales, I have known you—how many years is it? Ever since the major was first stationed here, and that's over thirty years. And I remember the tales of those years, the wild romances of one Paco Morales when we were all much younger than we are now, and I wonder how one can so completely forget that love, when it comes, takes us and makes us do its will. But instead of remembering that high wisdom, you have acted toward Adela as if you didn't know what youth or love or desire meant. And yet," she smiled, "and yet I've reason to believe that you did."

"Señora," interrupted the Spaniard, "it was not to talk of my youth I came here, but to bring back Adela."

The woman's voice was still patient. "You're not being wise about this, Paco Morales, and yet men call you wise, as the world goes."

"I am sorry."

"Listen. There is something of the cruelty of the beast in you. I can see it in your eyes. I tell you it is

dangerous to do what you are doing. The girl is distraught, desperate. If I know Ted Radcliffe I know he would break you in two if Adela suffers at your hands. But your unspeakable pride won't let you see this. You have threatened her with exile, threatened to tear her away from the man she loves and from this land she loves, and now you're surprised that she rebels at all this."

"Si. I am surprised. Surprised and disappointed."

Impatiently she shook her head at the trite phrase. "What would parents do without that bromide? I tell you again, Paco Morales, you're not wise. You expect her to submit as a Spanish girl of your generation would have submitted. But Adela is of this generation, and America's ways lie near to her heart."

Coldly Morales raised his hand. "Señora, again you are mistaken. I do not come to theorize. I come for Adela. Please to tell her I am here."

Aunt Clara's cigarette flared dangerously. Not often had men addressed her in just that cold, insistent tone. She fought, not too successfully, for patience.

Ignoring his command, she asked bluntly, "Just why do you object to Ted Radcliffe?"

"Object? In what sense, señora?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. Is there any good reason why he couldn't make Adela happy?"

"Is there any good reason, señora, why every American adventurer should be welcomed by me as Adela's suitor?"

Aunt Clara smiled. "I shouldn't be so sure about the adventurer part, Paco Morales. It's no secret that

Ted Radcliffe will be a partner of Bob within the year."

"We waste time, señora. May I again remind you I come for Adela? And may I add that Mexican custom gives the guardian unreserved custody of the ward?"

The woman's color had heightened. "In that case, isn't it just too bad we're not in Mexico?"

Morales's eyebrows rose in polite curiosity. "I do not understand."

Aunt Clara's patience had reached an end. "I mean you are now on American soil. What is more, you are on a military reservation of the United States. I mean further that Adela came to me for protection. If I gave this girl over to you, I would be lending a hand to God knows what mischance. I hoped to help heal up this silly quarrel, but now I'll keep Adela here as long as she wants to stay. Yes, and now, if I weren't the well-bred wife of a high ranking officer, I'd say, 'What in hell are you going to do about it, Paco Morales?'"

Silently Morales reached for his hat and gloves. Very ceremoniously he bowed. Hand on the doorknob he turned. "I wonder, in my own turn, what Major Blount will say to all this."

Aunt Clara exhaled a cloud of cigarette smoke. "I hadn't thought about it," she answered casually. "He'll probably recommend me for the Congressional Medal."

CHAPTER XXXI

AMONG the Mexican foothills, Blount had struck a hot trail.

Many times before the chase had been close, but never so promising as that night in early April. It was high time. All through the blustering Mexican winter Blount had combed the border foothills in search of El Coyote, and now, with the coming of another spring, the old soldier's temper had not sweetened by repeated failures. No one knew how much those months of disappointment had meant to the disappointed soldier. For long months the smiles of the men in Verdi had rankled. "The major's out after El Coyote again," they would say, and laugh. It was a stock joke. Everyone knew it. The major knew it. During March he had redoubled his efforts. The war department had given him the use of a band of scouts from Fort Leslie Ulrich and raised the number of his cavalry to two hundred. And now tonight scouts had brought him news of a large band, numbering between forty and fifty riders, who had passed along the foothills earlier in the day. They were making toward Ice-Box Cañon.

Blount too knew the Cañon. He had camped there the fall before. He knew that five miles beyond the mouth it widened into a grassy meadow, watered by a spring, surrounded by high, rocky cliffs. At the upper end a narrow trail made by game and cattle emerged, and led through a precipitous pass to the summit of the foothills. Beyond lay the land of the Yaqui.

Only a chance, but the major took it. If the band intended camping all night, he might be able to block up both entrances, provided he could get men to the upper end in time. If he could, he would have them between two fires. It meant a long, forced march through the night on the single chance that the bandits might remain by the spring until dawn.

Calling his chief scout, the major sketched the situation. "It's a gamble," he concluded, "but good or bad we've got to follow it. I want you to pick twenty men, take two machine guns and get to the pass by sunup. Place your guns there and hold it. You may find yourselves outnumbered two or three to one. But they can't come through that neck of a bottle fast enough to give you any trouble. Half a dozen men could hold that pass against an army. Two could hold it with machine guns. At dawn I'll push ahead with the rest of the men. If we're lucky El Coyote will find himself between us and granite walls on each side."

Half an hour later the pick of Blount's men, twenty in all, had silently saddled and slipped out into the night. At midnight the major ordered the remaining forces to break camp, and led them for two hours at a quick walk. Once a horseman rode out into the darkness and, returning an hour later, reported to the major. The band had turned up the cañon.

"The chances are they're going through, and the boys ought to beat them to the pass. How far are we now from the mouth of the cañon?"

"Less than half an hour."

"Good! Lead on. We'll camp at the mouth until

dawn. That will give the men a chance for a little sleep. But no fires. It's cold coffee and sandwiches for breakfast, and a damned early breakfast, too."

The way grew rockier. Blount doubled the number of advance scouts and threw out men on either flank. Slowly the dim figures made their way along the narrow trail that now led into the mouth of the cañon. Even here the major did not halt. To him at last had come the hope of success, and the scent of battle was strong after those weary months of failure. He looked up at the steep cañon walls on either side. Would El Coyote again elude him? He wondered. Was there a way of escape up there, a hidden way out that only the bandits knew? Eagerly the major rode on, and not until the cañon had narrowed to the width of the trail did he give the order to rest until dawn.

A sigh of relief passed among the troops. Men loosened the cinches of their horses, rubbed numbed hands back to life, and at last, squatting in little groups, talked in low tones or, leaning back, gained what sleep they might in that cold, unfriendly place.

The awaited dawn came quickly. A jutting pinnacle of granite high above caught the first red glow of sunrise and flung it down into the cañon. The gray dim outlines of men and horses became touched with faint color. The trail detached itself from out the gloom and now showed itself, winding steeply up the rocky gorge. Dew lay on the horses' saddles and on the broad brims of the soldiers' hats.

A quiet word passed down the column, and almost without a sound cinches were tightened, spurs buckled,

and Blount's little body of cavalry was on the move again. The light grew stronger. At times when the cañon straightened Blount could make out his advance scouts riding ahead.

For an hour they pushed on, then a rider came clattering down the trail. His voice was tense with excitement.

"Sir, just ahead is the camping place. There are embers of fire still burning. Fresh horse-tracks. They can't have been gone over an hour. Looks like there must be at least forty of them."

Blount felt his pulse leap. "That means the boys above will have time to get in position. Sergeant, push ahead with a dozen men. When they make contact call on them to surrender. If they won't, fall back. Don't try to attack, but hold them until we overtake you. Just let them know they're between two fires."

But the major was already farther up the cañon than he knew. In a little while the gorge widened and the men now were able to advance at a brisk trot. Pack animals and the two remaining machine guns were left behind. Again the trail grew rocky, and for an hour the only sound was the ring of steel-shod horses on the flinty trail and the creak of saddle-leather.

Suddenly from somewhere ahead came the spiteful crack of a machine gun and a far-off shout. Blount looked back down the cañon where his men were strung in a long, thin line. There was good shelter everywhere among the boulders. He smiled. The bandits would not have the slightest hope this time of breaking through.

Again came a burst of machine-gun fire, and the quick, sharp crack of a rifle. Then silence. Impatiently the major forced his panting horse up the trail.

"Why the devil—no messenger?" puffed the major.

An orderly clattered around the turn. "We've got 'em, sir. They tried to get through the pass, but Sergeant Muir's men were waitin'. Gave 'em a couple bursts and they turned back. Then our boys ahead opened up, and now they're bunched in a kind of cut in the cliff. Hard place to pry 'em loose from. Rocks all around the entrance. The sergeant says if you hold 'em there he thinks a few men can climb around and get 'em from above. It'll take some hours."

"Tell the sergeant to deploy each man and hold the bandits where they are. The main body of troops will be up in half an hour. Don't let the boys show themselves. Keep the detail at the pass in case of emergency—and, orderly," he called, as the soldier turned, "send half a dozen men to scale the cliffs. No, send a dozen, and we'll have that band at our mercy by noon. When the pack train catches up we can cook breakfast here. The smell of frying bacon may make those devils listen to reason."

Gingerly the old major dismounted. He straightened and, looking quickly about him, covertly kneaded his thighs. This damned bandit hunting had its drawbacks after one touched sixty.

He had stood there a full minute when the click of a horse's hoof made him turn to see a familiar figure coming leisurely up the rocky path. A smile of delighted surprise spread over the major's face. "Gad," he called.

"I might have known Don Bob would be in at the death."

The straight, spare figure swaying to the motion of the horse rode up to the major's side. Bob's gray eyes looked quietly about him, and the same quiet smile touched his lips, but his face was haggard.

"Your orderly tells me that victory has perched at last," he said, and again his eyes passed to the cañon walls, as if seeking some sign.

"Victory has certainly perched." Rapidly and with relish the major outlined the situation to his old friend. "We're waiting for the main body of troops now. I think before the hour's out you will be owing me that dinner," he concluded.

"I wonder. You know, I strongly doubt that you will find El Coyote in your granite trap up there."

"Perhaps not, but forty or fifty of his band are there, and that's probably all his outfit. And it's almost certain that out of one of them we'll learn something about El Coyote if we use the proper persuasion."

Bob nodded. "I think you're right. With most of his band captured, El Coyote's identity can't long remain a secret." In the midst of rolling a cigarette he asked, "What will you do with these men when you get them?"

"I've been thinking of that. We are capturing them on Mexican soil. Most, if not all of them, are Mexicans, so I'll probably turn them over to the Mexican authorities—except one or two who may care to give us information. Those I'll set free—always provided their tale leads us to El Coyote."

"And the rest go to the Mexicans." Deliberately Don

Bob inhaled his cigarette while he tapped with his quirt on the side of his leg. "That means death. Fifty of them. The pick of the band. Death and a damned good chance of torture."

"Puts El Coyote out of business, doesn't it, Bob?"

Gravely the rider nodded. "Completely out of business. For a while, at least. Yet I'm wondering if it's one-half so good as if you had captured El Coyote himself. For, consider. Time passes. El Coyote gathers another band, and then it's all to be done over again."

"He'll have one devil of a time getting another band after the border sees what happens to this one. But I'll grant that I'd rather have El Coyote than the whole mob that's bottled up in this cañon."

"You mean that?"

"Of course. There's no question. The boy I'm after is El Coyote, not his men. That's who I was sent out to get. But why talk about him?"

"I think, major *mio*, I can make a trade."

Quizzically the major looked up. "You mean we might trade these men for the bandit himself?"

Bob nodded.

"How the devil could you guarantee such a thing?"

"Oh, easily. I might, for instance, deliver up to you El Coyote even before you let the men go. That would be guarantee enough, wouldn't it?"

The major's eyes sparkled, then again looked doubtfully up at the grimly smiling man. Don Bob had so many little jokes one could never be sure. But to be the captor of the border's most famous bandit—to get him! If Bob really meant what he said.

The major plunged. "Bob, if you can hand over El

Coyote, I'll let every other damned bandit go his way, and I'll quit this country today. But what I want to know is, how in God's name can you or any other man bring in El Coyote?"

"Any other man couldn't, major," Bob answered slowly. "Only I can. For you see,"—and here he carefully crushed the life from that cigarette between his fingers—"you see, I happen to be El Coyote."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE words died back into silence. Mutely the major raised his head. Something in his brain fought back against the stark reality those words disclosed. He looked to see some twinkle of jest in the man's saddened gray eyes, or a gathering smile about the tight, straight mouth. A soldier came up and saluted, but impatiently Blount waved him back. Again he looked appealingly at Bob, then at last the old major's shoulders drooped and in his face the light of victory died. This, then, was to be the end of those years of friendship.

He raised his eyes wearily to the towering walls of granite while slowly comprehension came. The killer had been brought in. Now at last the long-coveted success was his. But the taste of victory was bitter as alkali in the old soldier's mouth and once again, as if from some great distance, he heard Bob's voice and felt his hand touch his shoulder.

"One plays and sometimes loses," the quiet voice was saying. "That is the best and worst of all these earthly games. Some consolation, though, to realize at the last I could not have done differently. Yes, it's something to know that, but perhaps not much."

The major raised his gray head. Added years seemed to have gathered about him. "Bob," he said, and the voice was husky, "I've known you a good part of a lifetime, and now you're asking me to believe it's you I've been hunting all these past months. It's you the whole border has sought."

Slowly Bob nodded. "I'm asking you to believe just

that. And I'm giving myself up just when I might have won. Just as the border country was ready to follow me. Even now I might win, but," he looked up the cañon, "I can't let those poor devils be turned over to the mercy of Paco Morales's tools."

Again his hand touched the major's shoulder. "Come, let's face it. Life can't be so serious a matter at our age, old friend—and death still less. I've had my share of years and of playing in the sunshine."

Bob gently fondled his horse, "But before I go with you, I'd like once more to talk to my men. Will you write a word to get me by the soldiers?"

The major fumbled in his pocket. Mechanically, as in a daze, he wrote on a card and gave it to Bob. He tried to smile, but only a pitiful quiver passed over his lips. His huddled figure, suddenly grown old, looked more like that of a captive than conqueror of the border's far-famed bandit.

"Give that to the sergeant, Bob," he mumbled. "I'll wait here."

At the line drawn about the fugitives' retreat, Don Bob passed the card to a wondering sergeant.

"They'll kill you sure, sir," the soldier warned, but without answering Bob rode across the rock-strewn cañon and straight toward the boulder field that guarded the entrance to the bandits' shelter. There he stopped and, raising his voice, called, "Manuel."

Almost at once a swarthy figure detached itself from among the strewn boulders.

"Señor!" His voice was filled with amazement. "For the love of God, how come you here?"

Bob rode forward. Leaning forward in the saddle he grasped the Mexican's hand, and together they went back to where the rest of the band crouched, alert and ready. Quietly he looked down at them, as one might look upon a group of children who had erred, but toward whom one could feel no anger.

"Why did you lead them to this trap, Manuel?"

"Señor, we were thirsty, and two of us were sick. And, as you know, only in this cañon is good, cold water and grass for the horses. And we did not think—"

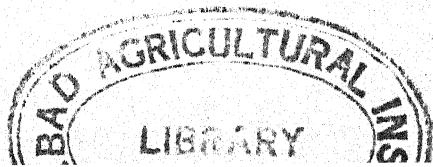
"I know. It does not matter. And yet for a cold drink of water the history of the border must be changed. For a moment's folly you find yourselves faced with a cañon full of cavalry. But let that go. I bring you good word. You are free men again. Within half an hour the American cavalry moves down the trail, leaving you free."

Manuel crossed himself. "Free! But, señor, it is a miracle." He laughed and looked about him. "None but El Coyote could do that, eh, my children?"

Bob stilled the shout of rejoicing with an upraised hand. "You are right, Manuel. None could have done it but El Coyote, yet even for El Coyote it was at a price."

The long, close fellowship between those two men made Manuel guess the answer. His smile of exultation died and in a tremulous whisper he asked, "You gave yourself up for us?"

"What else? I offered El Coyote in exchange for his band. There was no other way. It was a good trade.



Without you I could have done little, for you are the best of those who have come to me. It was better so. And yet,"—his clenched hand tightened on the saddle-horn—"we were so near victory."

For a time in the gloom of that granite recess he looked at them. Fearless, impulsive, doglike in their loyalty. Each one of them he had known—the history and the hopes of each. They had faced death together, they had kept back the power of Morales. Yes, it had been a good game, and a little glow of pride and of affection for these strangely assorted men showed now in Don Bob's troubled eyes.

They stood silent, helpless before the disaster that had overtaken their leader. Uneasily they looked at one another, like dumb animals in pain. He had been their protector. He had led them in revolt. He had taught them to hope, and now he was going away to face—none dared even guess.

Manuel's voice trembled. "Must it be this, *amigo*? Is it not better to fight our way out? Come, stay with us and together when darkness comes we will fight our way to freedom again. Do not let them take you. Without you what are we but helpless children? Do not go from us, you who have been our father."

But Don Bob shook his head and smiled. Then for the last time he spoke. "We have never pulled trigger against the soldiers of either your country or mine. To do that would have meant defeat to the cause. But my going does not mean defeat. Behind me I leave you to carry on. You are the hope of the borderland. Be men and no one can make you slaves. Stand for the liberty

that alone makes life bearable and you will never need me or anyone. You will be enough, each of you, unto yourselves. And now I go. There is much I would say to each of you, but the words would bring me pain, and here there is enough pain. You who have been faithful to me, be faithful to my memory. Protect the weak and make the strong fear you. If I could, I would stay with you always, for you are men, and life with you was good. And now"—Bob held out both hands in a little gesture of parting—"adios, *amigos*."

Like statues they stood about him. Like motionless, sorrowing statues they watched him mount and turn away. Above them the wind intoned a low requiem among the branches of the mountain firs. The sun cast long gashes of shadow across the cañon, and not until the last echo of his parting died away did these men move. Then, blinded with tears that would not be held back, old Manuel made the sign of the cross.

"May God deal gently," he whispered brokenly. "May the Mother of God be kind."

Already the major had ordered his men down the trail. He gave no reason for this sudden ending of the search, and the puzzled faces of his men were a mute reproach that, in his new affliction, the grizzled soldier did not even notice. When Bob joined him he was already sitting his horse, impatient to be gone and put an end to those intolerable thoughts.

Together they rode down the cañon, each unwilling to begin the task that had to come—the task that could lead to but one end. So in silence they rode ahead of

the main body of cavalry and when, by late afternoon, they emerged upon the level desert trail, the major began.

"Bob," he said, "nothing in life has ever hit me just as this has. It's knocked me. It's going to change all—everything in Verdi. The men who looked up to you, the leading part you took in everything Verdi did. They'll all stick by you, every man. And yet, what can we do? There must be something we can do, something I can do. I've been trying to think, but this thing—it dulls me. I find myself wishing I had never followed that trail. And yet I had to, didn't I, Bob?" Lines of suffering were deep on the old soldier's face.

"You did what we all do." Bob answered gently. "You did the thing that seemed best to you. That is what I did, and what Morales is doing. All of us do the things we think best according to our little lights and clouded understandings. And the outcome is often strange to look upon. But as for me—what can anyone do? You can do nothing now. Nor I." He smiled at a sudden thought. "Have you ever watched them playing roulette over at Mendoza's? You make your bets, and when you lay your pile of gold on the red, the little ball sometimes stops at black. Well, it's too late then to say, 'I made a mistake.' One simply smiles while the croupier sweeps away that little pile of gold."

But the major was already turning over plans. "Bob, suppose I hand you over to the Mexican government. There's nothing to prevent that, since you were caught on Mexican soil. Then every man of us will get Morales to say the word that will free you. You could repay him every head of stock you ever took. Your ranch

would more than do that. But if we bring you to trial in the States it means a long federal action and prison, Bob, for a long term. Perhaps life."

Bob raised his head and looked at the sunlit world about him. "Two years of prison would be life for me. Yes, Morales would have the power to release. He would be the only one with such power, but he would never do it, and I can't say I blame him." He shook his head. "No, let's not give the old buzzard that last satisfaction. I couldn't take my pardon at his hands. But I do ask this. There are arrangements to make. I want to see that every man of mine is made safe, as safe as anyone can be in this tragic country. I've already left a note at the bank providing for something like this. I want Ted to manage the ranch as an equal partner while I'm—away; and if I die I'm leaving the works to him. He'll be a leader among the ranchers in five years. So I want a couple of days before you let it be known you have captured El Coyote."

"I'll give you all the time you need, Bob. Even if the worst happens you won't be kept under detention until the trial comes. But don't let your men try a rescue. That will only mean bloodshed. And after that, God knows. Meanwhile, spend the night with me at camp, and tomorrow I'll go to Verdi with you. Verdi," he repeated brokenly. "I wish to God I'd never seen it."

"Softly," admonished Don Bob, and rubbed the velvet ear of his horse. "Remember what the Spanish proverb says: 'The work is with us, the event with God.' Who knows what still lies ahead, for good or evil?"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE sun had passed high noon on the following day when, powdered with alkali, Bob and the major reached the Verdi reservation. Ted had driven in from the ranch and was sitting on the shady porch of the commandant's home, with Aunt Clara and Adela.

Even before the major had taken off his spurs his wife read some vague, troubling message in the air. She linked her arm in his, and with quick anxiety scanned the major's worn face, but wise with the wisdom of years, she only said, "Come and sit down, you two. Lunch is on its way." Blount kissed her.

"I'm going inside and take a long drink of brandy, dear," he told her. Then he left them.

On the porch Aunt Clara turned to Bob. "What's wrong? Here, don't roll one, light one of mine."

Adela held a match. With a sigh of weariness Bob sank back into the chair that Ted had brought forward. "You spoil me, you three. You make me entirely too comfortable."

But Aunt Clara would not be put off. "Tell me what's the matter, or I'll go and pry it from the major," she warned.

"I wonder if you could," Bob considered. "Yes, I suppose you could, but I'd rather tell you myself. It will be easier. And it can be made terribly short. The story boils down to this: the major has captured El Coyote."

A gasp of consternation broke from Ted's lips. Bob looked at him and nodded.

"The game is up, old son," he said. Then, to the others, he added, "and the major, I think, was somewhat surprised to learn that El Coyote and Don Bob were one and the same wicked person."

"Bob!" Both women had gasped the word. Both had started toward his chair, and now they stopped, struck into sudden immobility.

Within the house the sound of a clock ticking seemed to redouble in intensity. A bee buzzed noisily among the vines, then slowly life and understanding returned to the little group.

Adela's hands closed desperately about his arm. "Bob, old Bob. Say it isn't true." It was like a cry of pain. "Not you, Bob."

"Myself." Then in his low, clear voice Bob told them all. He told it without regret, without emotion, as one might tell a tale that had happened long ago to someone quite remote. He told of the mistake his band had made, of the bargain with the major, but of the future he said nothing, and at the tale's ending he tossed away his cigarette and rose. He looked worn and weary. These people that he loved more than all else in life—he had brought them pain. Suddenly he wanted to get away—to be alone, before it became unbearable.

"I'm going over to the bank and then out to the ranch." He smiled at a sudden recollection. "Yesterday I lost a dinner to the major. Tonight if you can spare him, Aunt Clara, I want him to come and claim it. It may be my last chance to entertain for some time."

As he turned toward the steps the girl flung both

Ted, and I'll scribble a note adding my own plea. I'll tell Morales that every man in Verdi will respect him the more for showing mercy. I'll tell him the government will look favorably on such an act." He raised harassed eyes. "Great God, if I could only believe it would do any good!" And he hurried inside the house.

Ten minutes later with the girl at the wheel Ted was being driven out toward the desert. The sun of late afternoon hovered over the foothills, changing the blue mists to mauve and purple, touching them with rose, making the sands glisten, out to the edge of the world. Cactus blooms dotted the desert, telling of another spring. Torn with spent hopes he watched the ever-changing miracle of sunlight and cloud, and in silent understanding the girl laid her cheek against his shoulder.

Without turning his eyes, he spoke. "All this"—he nodded toward the splendor of spring about them—"it reminds me of something Bob once said about the great beauty of the world and the queer ways of men. One thing he loved above all else, Adela—freedom. The freedom that allows each man to live his life. And to bring freedom to the border people he has lost his own. We've got to win that freedom back for him. He couldn't live without it. He wouldn't want to. It will be hard enough to leave his beloved desert."

"I know, dear. We must, somehow, make the miracle happen." Again in silence they drove out toward the hacienda of Morales, fear and foreboding in the heart of each as to what might be the end.

At last the low hacienda loomed in the distance,

flanked by its long shadows of eucalyptus. A brooding quiet lay over the place, a menacing watchfulness, and once the girl shivered as if some cold current of air had touched her. Again she was placing herself and the man she loved in the hands of his enemies—they were staking everything on the slender chance of winning the sympathy of Morales. Something within her kept warning that it was a lost cause, telling her to turn back while yet there was time. Resolutely she put the thought from her and sped on.

The great black gates stood open and they drove up to the entrance of the deserted patio. No servants ran out to announce them. Their steps echoed on the polished tile, and still no sound came from within.

"Where can they be?" She whispered.

Inside, the macaw regarded them silently from his perch in the patio. Then a light footfall sounded behind them and from out the gloom Jito came forward. With that silent, catlike tread of his he strode up to them, and in the gathering twilight the two men stood again face to face while the memories of their enmity rose like unbidden specters between them. To the girl he made no sign of recognition, but fastened his dark eyes on Ted.

"*Por Dios,*" the Mexican's deep voice rumbled through the silent house, "I begin to think you are truly a very brave man, señor. Would it be hard for you to understand that the thing I want most in life is once more to get my fingers about your throat?"

A wave of blind fury swept over Ted at the man's tone—a longing to lash his clenched fists into the dark,

scowling face. For a second he held himself in leash, then slowly, the red anger within him died. There were more important issues at stake.

Adela had already stepped between. "Where is uncle, Jito?" she asked quickly.

The Mexican jerked his head toward the stairs. "In his room. Ever since you ran away he has been there. You will not find him amiable."

"I find no one amiable in this forbidding place," she flung back at him. Then to Ted, "I want to talk to uncle in his room. Stay here—and hope."

She ran her arm through Jito's. "Come, big one," she smiled tremulously up at him. "I want you to help me too."

For a moment the Mexican hesitated. His sullen eyes again sought Ted, then dropped to Adela's upturned face. Without a word he turned and followed her.

Ted watched them mount the stairs and a moment later heard the distant closing of a door.

Silence fell. Filled with misgiving Ted walked about the patio. Once he stepped out to gaze on the purpling desert. Every nerve within him was carrying some message of impending danger, some warning in the silence urging him to leave before too late. Impatiently he shook his head. He had to come. There was no other way. Lighting a cigarette, he resumed his restless pacing. Morales, after all, held the cards, and now all their hope centered on Morales. Again he stopped and listened. No sound. And yet Adela must know by now whether it was life or death. Would they never come down? Even now it must all be decided up there.

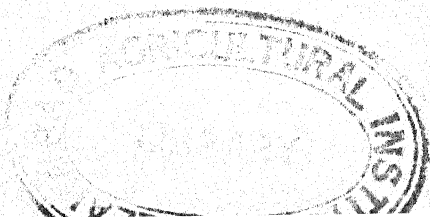
His restless pace increased. Would she have her way with that strange, relentless uncle of hers or—

Savagely he flung the cigarette aside. The silence, the uncertainty, were unendurable. Would nothing ever happen?

Then, as if in answer, he heard from above the muffled scream of the girl.

Like a maddened tiger he leaped for the stairs. A door opened as he ran down the shadowy hall, and directly ahead of him something gleamed. In the darkness Jito stood with drawn revolver.

"Señor," warned the low, rumbling voice, "one more step and you die."



FOR a second the American's muscles knotted. For a single breath Ted weighed the chances of dashing the gun from Jito's hand. Then reason came to his aid; there was no chance. The Mexican's too eager watchfulness told clearly of the quick death that awaited the least move.

Again Jito spoke. "Turn slowly, now, señor, and go down the stairs, then out through the patio to the servants' quarters."

Ted turned. Already he knew that Jito was taking him to the barred cell Morales had shown him once before. Yet as he walked down the stairs he listened. No sound came from above. His feet grated on the gravel walk, and at the door of the cell he stopped. The key was in the lock.

"Enter," Jito commanded.

Ted stepped inside, and heard the key turn noisily. Jito gave a low whistle, and to the peon who came running up he said in quick Spanish: "Go down to the village. Send to me my vaqueros. Send riders to all the camps and bring in everyone. Tell them to ride at high gallop. By midnight I want every man. Tell them El Coyote is captured and that Paco Morales holds his ally here. *Vaya*."

As Radcliffe caught the meaning of those last words, all hope died. Don Bob's release was now impossible, and Morales, far from showing mercy to a fallen enemy, had seized this chance of making Ted his prisoner.

Laying his face close against the bars, Ted looked back toward the hacienda. One vine-covered corner only was visible. Beyond, almost invisible in the dusk, were the open gates. Then something moved outside and suddenly his heart jumped to hear Adela's voice.

"Ted!" came the whisper.

The next moment her hands were on his and, reaching through the bars, her hands touched his face, while for a time he heard only a low, choked sobbing.

"Lover," she spoke at last, "I must go quickly. We have lost. Uncle is insane with anger and with plans for revenge. He won't listen to me. He held me while Jito took you here. I am afraid, desperately afraid, now, for you. I go to get the major."

Between the bars he felt her wet lips upon his own, and she had gone.

The warm air of the desert beat in on the girl's face as, faster and faster, she sped over the narrow road. To the left rose the granite Cross of the Conquerors, keeping its endless vigil beneath the stars. She flashed on the headlights. A ranchhouse loomed up and was quickly left behind. A lonely coyote skulked across the road, turning to watch the lights of her passing, and as she drove, her thoughts went racing on ahead, desperate, formless thoughts born of her bitter need. Her only hope, her only chance lay in the major's aid. If he refused, if he delayed—Adela thrust back the certainty of what must happen to Ted out there among a horde of maddened vaqueros.

A glow in the sky ahead told her Verdi was nearing, and with it came a recollection that the major

would be at Don Bob's on this last night of his freedom. At the crossroads she turned toward the ranch.

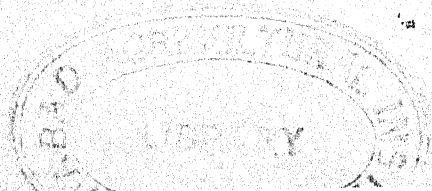
Once she looked up at the stars. "Dear God," she whispered, "he must come, and Uncle Paco must listen."

Turning through the gate at Bob's hacienda Adela swung past a band of horsemen clustered about the corral. Swarthy, sombreroed men with zarapes swung over their shoulders, sitting their horses in silence; and within the scabbard of each a rifle was thrust. Intent on her mission, the girl gave no thought to that silent group of armed riders, but drew up before the steps and, without knocking, threw open the door.

Inside, the major and Don Bob lingered over their coffee and cigars, their dinner clothes in strange contrast to the trail-worn costumes of the morning. One might have said that here sat two leisurely gentlemen, idly talking, enjoying a quiet hour of relaxation before the evening. Certainly nothing in Don Bob's manner would have betrayed the fact that for him the last moments of his freedom were swiftly passing.

Both men started to their feet as the girl burst in upon them. Rapidly Adela told them of Ted's capture and of her uncle's mad joy at the taking of Don Bob. Again a memory of the light that had flashed in Morales's eyes came back to her.

"He wants you hanged, Bob. He is going to do his best to have you hanged, and Ted—dear God, I don't know what he may do to Ted. Already he has sent for his vaqueros. He threatens to shoot Ted before them all because he was your accomplice."



"Ted never was."

"I know. I told him that. But it's an excuse, and he wants only the least excuse. He hates Ted because I love him. There's nothing he won't do to keep me from Ted—not even murder. Major, you've got to come back with me and make him give Ted up, even if you have to send your cavalry. He would give in if your cavalry came."

Blount's face reddened. "The damned old viper. He knows he hasn't the right."

"Major," Bob interrupted quietly, "let's not talk of right when we speak of Morales. Adela's plan is the only possible way. Either you force him to give Ted up, or I'm afraid to think what may happen to the boy."

"But I can't invade Mexican territory with cavalry."

"You've already invaded it, chasing me."

"My orders were to get out and stay out of Mexico as soon as the capture was made. Bob, I can't call on the soldiers to use force on Morales. I'd be court-martialed. We'll phone the consul—"

Bob's fist fell with a thud on the table. "Man, by the time a consul begins diplomatic investigation, the thing is done. Force is all that Morales will give heed to. Force he understands, and nothing else. You've got to bully him, threaten him. There's no other way, I tell you."

The little major walked to the window. "Adela, I'd do anything in the world for you, but this thing I can't do. Every paper in the country and in Europe tomorrow would be raging about armed intervention

of the United States in Mexico. God knows where it would end. The government couldn't back me, for it would mean war. Every civilized nation in the world would be watching. The government would have to repudiate me. I simply can't do it. I'll go myself, I'll threaten, I'll promise."

Bob shook his head. "It won't do. By yourself you can do nothing. It's too perfect a chance for Morales to revenge himself doubly on me and to rid the country of the man Adela loves. Nothing in life ever seemed so sweet to Morales as this. He'd never give it up. Force is the only chance."

In silence the three stood looking down at the burning candles. Sobs shook the girl, while angrily Bob looked across at the major.

Then, from beyond the light a casement window opened, and a burly Mexican bulked against the starry sky outside.

Bob's lips moved. "Manuel!"

"*Si, señor.*" The old Mexican turned the sombrero in his hand. "Señor, outside are men of the band. They have asked me to bear you a message. They are true men and loyal. They say if you give the word we will take you away into Mexico, where no man can find you. We will live together, there, señor, and gather men again until once more we may conquer. What prevents if you give the word?" He stopped and looked at Blount with hostile eyes. "The prison wall at Santa Fé is high, *amigo*, and it is not well that one who led us in this fight for freedom should go there and never see the sun. Give me the word, señor. Give

me a nod and once more you are a free man. By daylight you are in the mountains."

Bob smiled. "Do you understand, major? They want to steal me away from you."

The major nodded. "I'd be damned happy if you gave the word, Bob. Only I know you can't."

"No, that's just the joke of it. I can't." Bob reached for a cigarette. "This," he added smiling, "would be something Aunt Clara might enjoy."

With a little cry the girl ran to him. "Bob, take those men out there. Lead them again. Ride to the hacienda and set Ted free. You'll let him go, major, just tonight?"

"My dear girl, you're asking the impossible."

Violently the girl turned on him. In her voice a ring of contempt brought blood to the major's cheek. "Impossible! You, a soldier, say that? Are you willing to doom a countryman of yours to torture, perhaps to death? You can't do it—you know you can't. Give Bob one more day. If you don't and if anything happens to Ted, you'll be sorry until the end of your life, because you will be a coward, because you didn't dare to chance it when all our happiness lay at stake."

Helplessly the major looked at Bob, then down at the girl, and at last his eyes came to rest on the intent face of Manuel. There, before the eyes of all, he fought his fight. At last he took a deep breath. "I'll do it, God help me. Whether it's right or not, I've got to do it. We can't let Ted die. And if the United States government wants to tear up my commission, they can tear and be damned!"

Bob's eyes flashed. He seized the major by the shoulders. "Now I hear my old friend again." He sprang to the casement where, beneath him, a dim half-circle of horsemen waited, and as he flung open the window a deep shout arose, then fell to instant silence, while each man strained forward to hear his beloved leader's words.

"*Compañeros*," rose the clear voice, "once more we ride together. Perhaps for the last time. At dawn we fight our last fight against the hacienda of Morales. The time we have long awaited has come. Arouse the border, *compañeros*, gather every man. You, José, go east. Tell every rancher to mount and ride hard. Blasio, and you, Tomás, go west. Bring back the men from the Valley of Cortez. Go out into the desert ranges. Spread the word that the border has long waited for. Say to all that tonight El Coyote rides against the enemy and for the last time. Let every man who has horse and gun follow on to Morales's. Let one of you go out to Eagle Rock and light there the signal fire for the Yaqui." He turned to the couple beside him, his eyes ablaze. "By God!" he exulted, "this night I'll turn hell loose along the border. Tonight ten generations of oppression will be avenged. Tonight freedom comes." He waved toward the darkness outside.

"Go, *compañeros*. Ride as men of the desert ride who seek freedom or quick death."

The night trembled with the sound of shouting. The pounding of horses' hoofs was like muffled thunder. Madly the horsemen sped out toward the road, and the hand of each touched the pistol at his belt. The shout-

ing died. The hoof-beats faded among the desert sands.

Bob turned. "Saddle my horse, Manuel. In five minutes we ride together."

He caught Adela in his arms. "If we save Ted, it will be because of you. Go back to your car, little girl. Drive to the village and tell your people that soon El Coyote comes. Rouse them. They, too, await my word." He raised a clenched fist. "By dawn, Paco Morales, you will learn for all time the bitter taste of fear."

ALL that night, under the stars, along dim trails, and east and west over the Verdi highway, swift horsemen rode, stopping for a moment at solitary ranch-houses, knocking on closed doors, giving their brief message, then galloping on again. Not a border settlement within twenty miles, not a peon hut was unvisited by the galloping horsemen of El Coyote.

In Verdi a score of men quietly buckled on their guns and walked out to the corrals. Mendoza's silently gave forth its quota of fighting men who, in years past, had ridden with Don Bob. So, in twos and threes through the long night armed riders rode silently, meeting at crossroads, joining other grim-faced men, pushing steadily southward, swinging forward in that tireless shuffling trot of the desert, out toward the hacienda of Morales. They spoke little, their steady eyes fixed on the darkness ahead. No need of speech among these men held together by the bond of danger and a common cause. Ahead lay desperate work, and the reward of that night's riding was to be for many a bullet in the early dawn.

Throughout the night upon the cliff that men called Eagle Rock a signal fire gleamed like an angry star. and far to the south the Yaqui chief read its message and, arming, rode with his naked warriors toward the desert.

The border country was rising. Those past years of oppression were bringing at last their full harvest of bitter fruit. Each silent rider knew that with the dawn

came the testing, the day when either freedom or failure and exile would be their reward. For this day they had waited long years, and now the fierce exultation of the coming fight held them, making them press their spurs deeper into the lathered sides of their horses. So, through the starlit night they streamed southward across the desert.

Just before sunrise a girl drove madly out over the desert road from Mendoza's. Dead-white her face, her blue-black hair swept by the passing wind, but ever those haunted eyes of hers scanned the slowly brightening desert to the south.

As the stars paled in the breaking dawn a tall, gaunt figure stood in an upper window of the hacienda. His black eyes rose to the steep edge of the mesa, where the growing light cast in black outline the Cross of the Conquerors. Armed horsemen were circling up there, and even as he watched more men joined them, while still farther back galloping riders hurried on to the mesa's rim. He turned his eyes to the south, where from beyond the river, drawing nearer and nearer, came the dreaded Yaquis, their thick black hair streaming behind them, their almost naked bodies bent low over foam-flecked horses.

For a silent moment he watched those gray, dim figures of approaching horsemen, then smiled and called back within the darkened room. The huge leader of his vaqueros joined him, and together they followed the descent of El Coyote's riders until they were lost to sight beneath the river bank.

Morales spoke. "These vermin who come to avenge

their leader may find a little surprise awaits. Are all your vaqueros here?"

"More than enough to beat back these dogs."

"Do not despise them, Jito *mio*."

The Mexican made a gesture of contempt. "Without their leader, what can they do?"

Morales's long finger pointed to the river. "I have seen well over a hundred men descend out there. Blind mad they are at the loss of their chief. Beyond are the Yaqui with Anton at their head. No, they are not to be despised—they are to be killed—every man. *Bueno*. Perhaps within an hour we shall know who is to be ruler of the border, Paco Morales or its peons." He looked down into the dark obscurity of the courtyard, then turned back to the room.

"Meanwhile, should we not close accounts with the new owner of the Esperanza property?" He reached into the drawer beside him and drew out an automatic. But Jito shook his head.

"He is a brave man, señor. Let him live awhile. Besides"—a ghost of a smile passed over his dark face—"besides I may want to fight with him again."

A little contemptuous laugh broke from Morales. "You stupid fool, Adela loves him."

"I know. But if I let you kill him I could never look at her again. And so, in this one thing, señor, let me for a time have my way."

Once more the old man's eyes sought the desert. "I overstay my day on earth," he said at last. "Adela, and now you." He straightened his shoulders. Again he had become the cold leader. "Go down among your

men, Jito. See that the gates are well chained. Station men behind every corner of the building and on the roof of the hacienda. Put your best shots at the windows. Let them wait until these fools of El Coyote's attack, then shoot." Again he looked out at the desert where, high up above them, the mesa caught the first sun ray.

Screened by the steep bank of the river, El Coyote gathered his band. Nearly two hundred strong, they held among their number the best men of the border, and now they crowded around their leader, who led them for the first time unmasked.

With a frown Bob looked at the rapidly brightening desert. "I wanted to attack before dawn," he said quickly. "Each minute makes it easier for them. Jito's vaqueros are inside. They expect us to attack the gate and every rifle there will be ready for it. I want all but twenty of you to remain here. Kill every vaquero who shows himself on the hacienda roof. The twenty men I choose will ride with me close to the wall on the south side. There, by standing in our saddles, we can reach the top. It will be a hot minute's work getting over in the face of their fire. Once over, we'll rush them, drive them back into the hacienda, and while you are pouring lead through the windows, I will unbar the gates. Then in you come, every man of you. Enough words, *compañeros*. Let them feel lead and steel."

His lips closed. His steel-gray eyes passed proudly over the men before him. With a thrill he saw on



the face of each a fierce desire to wipe out the domination of those past years. Quickly he chose the men to follow him, then he turned his horse and dashed for the hacienda wall.

Almost at once flames began flashing from the upper windows. The barred gates became a spitting sheet of flame. Bob had been right—to force the gates under that hail of shots would have been madness. They were racing now for the south wall. At his right a grizzled rider gasped, "*Dios!*" and fell. The short stretch between them seemed an infinity of space. In the growing light a murderous fire from the hacienda roof swirled among them, and before the first men had gained the wall, Bob's band had lost a fifth of its number. Ten yards from the wall Bob's horse plunged and fell, riddled by rifle fire. Rolling free, Bob ran to the nearest rider and vaulted up behind him.

"*Adelante, amigo,*" he waved his rifle aloft, and together they leaped forward. Already a dozen of his men stood in the shelter of the wall, and standing in their saddles, began springing over into that hell of shot and flame beneath. As Bob landed among them the vaqueros had already fallen back and now were fighting doggedly, their backs to the hacienda, while from every outbuilding and from the roofs they poured shot after shot into the oncoming men. From the windows above well-directed volleys lashed El Coyote's band.

Outside, from the shelter of the river bank, Bob's best marksmen were making life perilous for Morales's vaqueros on the hacienda roof. Behind them the rest waited impatiently for the opening of the gates. Only

the Yaqui, casting off all restraint, rode in wide circles about the hacienda, firing from beneath the necks of their horses, filling the air with their shrill cries.

It was darker inside the courtyard. Leaving his men to hold the attention of the vaqueros, Bob crouched low along the wall until he reached the gates. Here all was quiet. The fighting had drawn Morales's men to the other side of the hacienda. Bob slipped a full clip of cartridges into his automatic. He remembered the great, rusty lock on the gate—a shot would shatter it, then before Morales's men could take up their position the gates would be open. But as he looked up he started—a steel chain had been wound about the gates and wired fast. It would take long minutes to undo it.

Already precious time was passing. The light grew stronger and outside the wall his impatient band were riding closer, eager for the opening gate. Within the enclosure his men were falling before the vaqueros' fire—with every minute of delay the tide of battle was turning against them. Maddened with disappointment, Bob fired into the wired chains above him. Not a strand loosened.

But from a near-by building one man saw him standing by the wall. The first shot had aroused Ted out of fitful slumber within Morales's cell. From the hacienda he heard the cry, "El Coyote!" and with a pounding heart realized that Bob's band had arrived. Through the closed gate he could make out the figures of circling Yaqui and the steady gleam of rifle fire.

Crouching figures ran past his barred window, running toward the hacienda, firing as they ran. From

close about the corner of his prison Ted heard the repeated shots of a rifle, and knew that one of Jito's vaqueros was using it as a place of concealment.

To the left, silhouetted against the reddening sky, he saw Bob's men leaping the wall, dropping down, stooping, rising, firing, driving the vaqueros back. With a gasp he saw Bob's form poised for a moment on the wall, then drop down into the garden. The fire from the hacienda had redoubled.

As Ted watched Bob's cautious advance on the gate a shadow flitted before the barred window of his cell. A figure stepped directly in front of him and with infinite care raised a heavy rifle. He leaned back, steadying himself against the cell wall. Very carefully the sights aligned, the big black barrel pointed slowly to the crouching form of Don Bob.

Ted's arms shot through the bars, knocking the gun aside. Like great vises his hands closed about that dark throat, and reaching forward he raised the man clear from the ground. For a moment he heard his victim's feet beating a frenzied tattoo on the wall, then slowly all movement ceased, and Ted dropped his limp burden to the ground. Lifting his voice above the clatter of rifles and the spiteful crack of automatics, Ted shouted, "Bob!"

Across the courtyard Bob turned, caught sight of Ted's frantic waving, and ran to the prison.

"Stand close in, for God's sake, close in the shelter of the wall," Ted called.

The next moment he saw Bob's tanned face smiling through the bars. "Thank heaven you're alive, old son,"

came the quiet voice. "I was half afraid Morales would end it for you."

But Ted was already examining his prison door.

"Pass that gun through here," he directed.

He forced the barrel well down between the lock and the outer wall, then pushed. The door gave just a fraction of an inch. The lock moved ever so slightly, then the barrel of the gun bent under the pressure.

"You've started it," Bob called.

"Stand aside," warned Ted. He stepped back the full length of the cell, then crouched and hurled himself forward. The little building rocked, and a shower of plaster rained from the ceiling. The lock was hanging from a single bolt. Once more Ted flung himself at the bars, and this time, with a screech of torn steel the bolt swung past the broken lock.

Ted rose and, seizing Bob, pulled him back into the security of the cell.

"Where is Adela?" came Ted's first anxious question.

"In the village, raising the men. If she succeeds, we'll have fifty more at our side. But our only chance is to get the gates open. They've chained them. It's suicide in this light to climb over the wall.

Quickly Ted raised his head. "I can lift that off the hinges."

"Lift it?"

"I think so. Can your men cover me for two minutes?"

For answer Don Bob drew both automatics from his belt and stepped outside. "I'll cover you," he replied.

In the courtyard the fight was going badly. No longer sheltered by the darkness, Bob's men were kneeling unprotected, firing steadily into the hacienda. Already half of them lay in crumpled heaps on the ground. The vaqueros had fallen back to the shelter of the inner walls, and now poured volley after volley through every window and from every corner of the roof.

Quickly the two men swept across the yard. A flame flashed from the window above, and a bullet rang on the iron bar of the gate before them. Turning, Bob fired twice, and a vaquero tumbled down upon the grass.

Bending his knees and wrapping both arms about the gate where it hung on the hinges, Ted slowly straightened. Great cords stood out on his neck. Again he lifted with all his might. The rusty iron rose slowly, and even before Don Bob could help him Ted had raised it and swung it clear from the hinges. Together both men pushed, and the heavy gate, unsupported, clattered upon the sand.

And now through the narrow opening Bob's horsemen began pouring, crowding, riding up to the very windows of the hacienda, meeting fire with fire. Heedless of flying lead, silent with hate, they streamed into the courtyard, while ever behind them riders surged and crowded, until it seemed that all the border rode to battle for El Coyote.

From the village a dull, angry roar rumbled, gaining in volume until it reached the ears of the fighters.

"By the Lord, Adela has done it!" Bob cried. "The

townspeople are coming. This will be a black day for Morales when his peons remember past debts."

No time to say more. Suddenly from the southern patio of the hacienda burst a band of vaqueros, fighting to reach the corrals. Savagely the Yaqui threw themselves on their blood enemies, and the crack of firearms gave place to the heavy thud of flesh on flesh.

Close quarters now. The band of El Coyote was settling old scores, with knives and with bare hands. Caught up in a swirl of fighting peons, Ted was swept toward the corral in time to see the villagers fall upon a knot of vaqueros who had fought their way to the gate. Towering head and shoulders above them all he moved like some angry war god, raging through the thick of the fighting until to the terrified vaqueros the big Americano seemed at every turn of the crowded courtyard. Ted, too, was paying an old debt. But always his eyes searched restlessly for something they could not find—the huge figure of Morales's chief vaquero. At length he stopped, heedless of the cries that rose about him, and turned to the hacienda. Jito and Morales—they must be there. His hands tightened on the heavy gun, and with narrowed eyes he ran forward.

Just ahead he caught sight of Bob, automatics blazing in both hands, fighting his way into the hacienda. Death was flaming from every window. For an instant Ted saw the great form of Jito appear above him and fire into the men beneath. But outside the shots were less frequent. Except for the hacienda itself, the forces of Morales were defeated. Leaping over prostrate

forms, pushing his way forward, Ted pressed on to the door.

Smoke hung low in the patio and a deathlike silence hovered there. The change from blazing morning light to the hacienda's smoke-filled obscurity halted him, and for a moment he closed his eyes.

Slowly the long patio took on shadowy outline. At the farther end the stairs revealed themselves through the smoke-laden gloom, and there, motionless in the half-light, Ted's startled eyes saw the two antagonists at gaze. Half-way down the stairs Morales had stopped, and now looked silently down into the upturned face of Don Bob. In the Spaniard's hand was a black automatic, and on his lips the same half-cruel, half-jesting smile, as for the last time he confronted the man who had wrested away his kingdom. Bob made no move, no sound. Steadily his steel-gray eyes burned back, and the hands that grasped the automatics tightened. Like statues, like shadowy portentous statues, they stood there, while even the hushed dawn seemed to await the destined end.

Held by the deadly intensity of that moment, Ted tried to cry out, but only a hoarse whisper came.

So, for the space of a heart-beat, those two enemies looked into each other's eyes, then from their hands blue flames leaped and the silence of the patio was shattered with the crash of death.

Morales's gun clattered upon the stairs. His clutching fingers reached to his throat. He tried to cough, but could not. His legs doubled beneath him. He dropped slowly, and lay still.

At the foot of the stairs Ted raised in his arms the outstretched figure of Don Bob. The fighting, the hiss of lead, the crack of rifles, were forgotten. All anger, all the wild exultation of battle had died, leaving in their place an agony of desolation and unutterable pain.

Outside, one by one, the shots died away. Quiet fell. The band of El Coyote had conquered.

The sun rose higher over the mesa, casting long shafts of light through the half-drawn curtains, but within the hacienda Ted sat on with brooding eyes that saw nothing, holding between his hands the calm, untroubled face of one who had been his friend.

A shadow fell across the doorway. A slender form dropped to her knees beside him and Ted's eyes looked for a moment into the eyes of Ann. Gently she raised Bob's head, pressing it against her breast, laying her wet cheek against the grizzled hair. Heartbreakingly her soft fingers touched his face and his closed eyes, and tremulous lips breathed brokenly the one word, "Bob." Again and once again that low voice called "Bob," until at last the heavy anguish of despair silenced all sound and only the eyes spoke all that her lips had found too late to say.

Moments passed over that little tableau of desolation. An eternity of moments, then the man's lids fluttered feebly and for the last time the gray eyes smiled weakly up. A new peace touched that pale face. Once the lips moved, as if to say some word, but the word died back into nothingness, and now for all time the gray eyes closed. The long fight was over.

Torn with a sorrow beyond the reach of words or

tears, she clasped the body to her, while, with dry, stinging eyes, Ted gazed on the eternally impassive face.

Slowly the great room filled with the followers of El Coyote. Sombreros in hand, they ranged themselves silently about the walls. In dumb grief they looked to Manuel, standing with bowed head beside the only friend he had ever known. There in the growing light those men of the desert laid their last tribute of silence and sorrow before him the border had known as El Coyote.

From the stairs above something moved. A huge dark form came slowly down and, stooping, picked up the body of Morales. Slowly he descended the stairs and with the limp figure in his arms he came forward and looked in silence down. Then, as one walking in a dream, he turned again toward the stairs.

Two of Bob's men sprang forward, revolvers ready, but before them rose the quick, arresting hands of a girl, and Adela threw herself between Jito and the advancing men.

"Let there be peace, my people," her choked low voice commanded. "Here there is death and suffering enough."

Old Manuel's black eyes passed to the long window, then rose to the mesa's edge where, bathed in the morning sunlight, shone the Cross of the Conquerors. He turned at last to his men, standing so strangely silent in that bitter hour of victory. "Come, my children," he said. "Above a resting place waits for one who brought us freedom. The work of El Coyote is forever done."

EPILOGUE

UP on the sunlit rim of the mesa a vagrant wind from the south bore eternal promises of spring.

It stirred fitfully the desert sands about that tall granite Cross of the Conquerors and rippled the coppery hair of a girl gazing out over the little valley beneath. The bareheaded man beside her said no word. They were watching a solitary horseman far below them on the trail to the foothills. Once he stopped to look back, his huge dark figure bowed in reverie.

"It is Jito," the girl said softly. "He came to say good-by. He told me I should say to you that for him the fight is done."

Bright tears clustered in the girl's eyes. Once again she looked out over the mesa's edge to where the river curved and where, among the ranches, cattle grazed in the fenced pastures, and deeper green told of tilled, fertile fields. In the still air tiny threads of smoke rose from the ranchhouses. Peace had come at last. Peace and promise for tomorrow. With two slender hands she drew close her lover's arms about her.

"A new day," she whispered. "Lover of mine, for these, our people, we must make it a more glorious day than they have ever known." She stopped. She looked with glistening eyes at the Cross.

"Don Bob would have it so," she ended.

THE END

